

TERROR IN CUT-THROAT COVE

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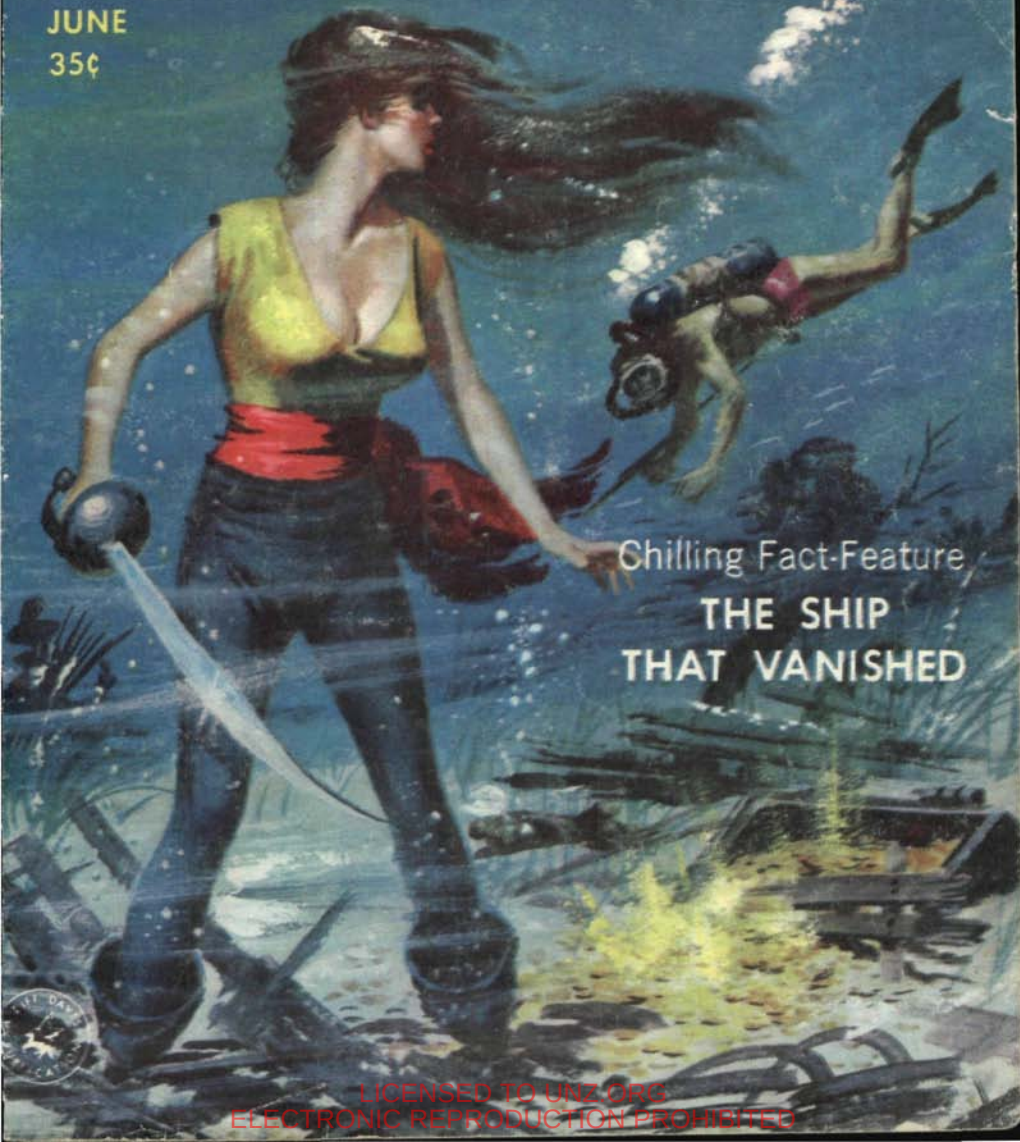
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FANTASTIC, Vol. 7, No. 6, June 1958, is published monthly by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, William B. Ziff, Chairman of the Board (1946-1953), at 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter at Post Office at Chicago, Ill. Subscription rates: U. S. and possessions and Canada \$4.00 for 12 issues; Pan American Union Countries \$4.50; all other foreign countries \$5.00

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fantastic

JUNE

1958

Volume 7

Number 6

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

Publisher

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**FICTION****TERROR IN CUT-THROAT COVE**

By Robert Bloch..... 6

THE MADDER THEY COME

By Lloyd Biggle, Jr..... 46

THE MAN WHO TOOK IT WITH HIM

By Henry Slesar..... 58

NEOSHO'S CHOICEST

By James E. Gunn..... 74

THE THING BENEATH THE BAY

By John Hagan..... 86

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

By Wilson Kane..... 105

FACT**THE SHIP THAT VANISHED**

By Eric Frank Russell..... 115

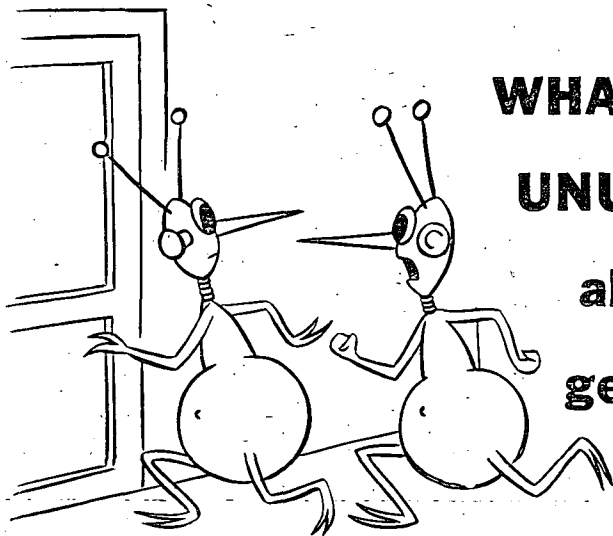
FEATURES**EDITORIAL**..... 5**ACCORDING TO YOU**..... 124

Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY, One Park Avenue, New York 16, New York. William Ziff, President; H. J. Morganroth, Vice President; W. Bradford Briggs, Vice President; Michael Michaelson, Vice President and Circulation Director; Victor C. Stabile, Treasurer; Albert Gruen, Art Director.



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IT MIGHT APPEAR, FROM OUR—

—contents page that this is a “sea stories” issue of *Fantastic*. We have “Terror In Cut-Throat Cove” along with “The Ship That Vanished” and “The Thing Beneath The Bay.”

Actually, there was no intent in this direction. Our apparent preoccupation with water is a coincidental result of putting together a group of the best stories obtainable. The issue just happened to come out dripping with sea water.

We’ve been told by people who should know that we have a bad habit here of rushing our best stories into print at the earliest possible moment. They say we should hang onto a few so as to schedule them in when a dry period, quality-wise comes along. They say by treating the best as though it grew on trees, we’re setting a standard we can’t possibly live up to.

So maybe we’re wrong, but this we don’t believe. It’s a conviction around here that every issue can be tops. So far, according to your letters, we’ve been hitting this high standard and we think it’s going to stay that way.

To a great extent, we’re feeling our way these days with *Fantastic* in many ways. For instance, we’re not sure yet, just what ratio between fact and fiction you readers want. And your letters to date haven’t given us a clear picture in this respect. So we’re going to keep the word *Entertainment* pinned over our desk and keep right on batting away. We’re moving into ever-wider fields in search of material and we’ll say this: You may be shocked by future issues of *Fantastic*, but you’ll never be bored.—PWF

TERROR IN CUT-THROAT COVE

By ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

When Bob Bloch puts on his fright-wig and goes to work on a terror-tale, his readers are seldom disappointed. We think this is one of his best. If you read it just before bed-time, we promise you won't sleep very well.

YOU won't find Cutthroat Cove on any map, because that is not its real name. And you can search a chart of the West Indies thoroughly without locating the island of Santa Rita.

I have changed the names for obvious reasons. If those reasons are not obvious at the moment, they will be by the time you finish this account.

My own name is Howard Lane, and I lived on Santa Rita for almost a year without ever hearing of Cutthroat Cove. That isn't too surprising, for it wasn't the lure of buccaneers and bullion that brought me here—in fact, you



Desperately, Howard



tried to drag Dena toward safety.

might say I left the United States just to get away from the atmosphere of piracy and plunder which dominates the modern commercial scene.

You might say it, but I did say it, night after night, in Rico's Bar. Eventually, of course, I'd stop talking and fall down. Nobody ever paid much attention to me—before, or after.

Except on the night when I met Don and Dena. The teddy-bear and the Christmas-tree angel.

I had a little bit too much of Rico's rum that evening, and I admit it. But even after I got to know them I still thought my first impression was right.

Teddy-bear. That was Don, standing at the bar beside me; blonde, burly, his short arms thick and bare and covered with that soft golden fuzz; his nose splayed and pink, and his eyes like big brown buttons. I watched him order a drink. American beer. American beer, in cans, at a dollar a throw! And he was tossing American money on the bar—a twenty. That was enough to make me look twice. We seldom get strangers or tourists in Santa Rita, and the infrequent visitors never have any money. So I watched the teddy-bear as he

carried the two cans of beer over to a table in the corner. And that's when I saw her sitting across from him.

The Christmas-tree angel. Her dress was white and wispy, her hair was spun gold, her eyes china-blue. The complexion was peaches-and-cream, the peaches being slightly ripened by the sun. She laughed up at the teddy-bear as he approached, and I felt an unreasoning resentment.

Why is it always that way? Why does that kind of a girl always pick that kind of a man?

I'd asked myself that question a thousand times. I'd asked it ever since I'd come to Santa Rita a year ago. In fact, that's the real reason I *had* come; because once I'd picked just such a girl—only to find she picked that sort of man.

And I knew what he was, the moment I looked at him. He was the Muscle Beach Boy, the bushy-eyebrows type, the kind who shows up in all the cigarette ads with a tattoo on his hand. I made a little bet with myself about what would happen after he had poured out the beer. Sure enough, I won. He took hold of the empty beer-can in one

ham-like hand and squeezed, crushing it flat.

That made *her* laugh again, and I knew why. Because she wasn't a Christmas-tree angel, after all. She was just the kind of a girl who fooled my kind of man into thinking that's what she was. So that we treated her that way; like a fragile, precious, enchanting ornament at the unattainable top of the tree of illusion. Until one of these crude animals came along to grab her with his furry paws, drink his fill, slake his lust, then squeeze her and toss her aside. But she liked that. Beer-cans are made to be crushed. Laughing beer-cans and tattooed teddy-bears.

Yes, I was drunk enough, I suppose, with my stupid similes and maudlin metaphors and the whole sickening mixture of cheap cynicism, sentimental self-pity, and raw rum.

Drunk enough so that when the teddy-bear returned to the bar and ordered another round, I pretended complete indifference. Even after he tapped me on the shoulder, I took my own ill-natured time before turning around.

"Care for a drink?" he asked.

I shrugged. "No, thank you."

"Come on, have a beer! Thought maybe you'd like to join us — we're strangers here, and we'd like to get acquainted."

That intrigued me. I knew the teddy-bear type, or thought I did. And while they're often full of false geniality at the bar, they *never* invite you to join them when they have a Christmas-tree angel in tow. Unless, of course, there's some ulterior motive involved.

Well, I had ulterior motives, too. American beer was a dollar a can—and I hadn't been able to lay a dollar bill down on the bar for a single drink in over eight months now.

I nodded. He held out a golden paw.

"My name's Don Hanson."

"Howard Lane."

"Pleased to meet you. Come on over, I'd like you to meet Dena, here. Dena, this is Howard Lane." He turned to me. "Dena Drake, my secretary."

I stared at her.

"It's really *Dinah*," she told me. "Like in the song. But Danny Kaye made a recording once, years ago, and he pronounced it *Dena*, and that's what my kid sister called me. So I guess I'm

stuck with it. Everybody does a double-take when they hear it."

I nodded, but not in agreement. It wasn't her name that caused me to stare. It was Don Hanson's description of her as his secretary. Their relationship was so obvious I couldn't imagine anyone except a child coming up with such an uninspired lie. Besides, it wasn't necessary here. Santa Rita isn't Santa Monica—only a newcomer would feel it necessary to apologize for the obvious. Still, this Don Hanson *was* a newcomer. In fact, that's what he was talking about, now.

"Just got in before sun-down," he was saying. "Little surprised to see how small this place is—not even a hotel, is there? Doesn't matter, really, because I can sleep right on the boat."

"You came in your own boat?"

"It's a yacht," Dena said. "We sailed all the way from Barbados."

Don chuckled. "Pay no attention to her. It isn't much of a yacht, and besides, the crew did all the sailing. We couldn't be bothered, could we, honey?"

I would have liked it if

Dena had blushed. But she didn't blush; she squealed as Don did his crushing act with the beer-cans again.

Then he turned to me and grinned. "Lucky I ran into you this way," he said. "I was intending to look you up very soon."

"That's right," Dena chimed in. "We don't speak Spanish, either of us, but Roberto—that's the first mate of our crew—he does, and he talked to somebody here in town after we landed. That's how we found out you're the only white man on the whole island."

"Is that true?" Don asked. "Are you living down here all alone with these Negroes?"

"No," I said.

"But they told Roberto—"

"No," I repeated. "It is not true. There are very few pure-blooded Negroes on Santa Rita. The bulk of the population is of mixed blood; *Mestizo* and *marino* and even more complicated combinations of Negro, Carib, Spanish, Portuguese and French racial stocks. These people are for the most part simple and uneducated, but they have pride."

"Sure, I understand. I thank you for the tip. But you are the only white man."

"According to your inter-

pretation of anthropology, yes."

"Dig him." Dena giggled. She gave me a melting sideways glance from beneath the long eyelashes—the kind of a glance such girls practice while sitting before a mirror and curling those eyelashes. "You'll pardon my curiosity, but just what are you doing way off here in this god-forsaken place?"

"I am drinking your employer's beer," I said, in a flat voice. "And for the past year I have been drinking rum. And this is not a god-forsaken place. It is an exotic tropical paradise, complete with cockroaches, beetles, bedbugs, mosquitoes, flies, and Black Widow spiders. Only one form of vermin is unknown here—the tax-collector. His absence more than makes up for the presence of the other insect pests, and also explains my own."

"You a tax-dodger, is that it?" Dena's voice held genuine interest. "A gambler on the lam, maybe?"

I shrugged. "I'm afraid it's not quite that romantic. I happen to be a free-lance writer with an unpredictable income. Having no family ties, I decided to look around for a place where the cost of living is low. Here in Santa

Rita I have rented a roomy old furnished house built in the days of Spanish occupation, acquired a devoted couple as servants, and supplied myself with ample food—for less than I'd spend in such mainland paradises as Downhill, Oklahoma or Flyspeck, Utah."

"But don't you ever get lonely?"

"I was lonely long before I came to Santa Rita," I told her. "You can be lonely in New York."

"Brother, don't I know it!" Her smile seemed a little more genuine, but I didn't have an opportunity to analyze it.

Don put his hand on my arm. "Free-lance writer, eh? How's it going?"

"So-so. Some months good, some months not so good. It varies."

"Well. Maybe you'd like to earn a few bucks. I could use a little help."

"What doing?"

"Oh, sort of straightening things out with the local natives. You know these people, maybe you could smooth the way for me. I'd like to get a couple of permits, for one thing."

"Fishing? You don't need anything for that."

"Not fishing, exactly. Diving."

"He's a marvelous skin-diver," Dena said. "Absolutely fabulous."

I nodded. "That won't require any official permission, either."

"Even if it's a salvage job?"

"Salvage?"

"Treasure," Dena said. "Why don't you level with him, darling?"

"Why don't you shut up?"

Don scowled. He turned it into a grin for me. "All right, you might as well know. I've got a lead on something pretty big down here."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Did somebody sell you a map?"

"No, it isn't a map. It's a manuscript. An old manuscript."

I nodded. "And it describes how one of the galleons laden with bullion from the Inca mines was wrecked and sunk right here off the shoals of Santa Rita, in clear water. Is that it?" I gave him back his grin, with interest. "Why, that's one of the stalest yarns in the Indies! Somebody's always waiting to make a sucker out of the tourists with that gag. As far as I know, nobody has salvaged a Span-

ish treasure-ship anywhere in Caribbean waters for years."

Don shook his head. "Perhaps we'd better get a few things straight," he said. "First of all, I know about the treasure-ship dodge. I've knocked around these parts for a couple of years, mostly diving, and doing some fishing for kicks. A man can really live down here."

"The Hemingway bit," I said.

"Do you know Papa?"

"I spit in his milk. I'm a Beatrix Potter fan, myself."

"You don't say," Don muttered. "Well, anyway, I'm not a sucker fresh out of Miami. And I've gotten together a pretty good crew of boys. Five of them, including this mate of mine, Roberto. It was his father who had the manuscript."

"Don went after him when the sharks got him," Dena said. "He told me about it. He pulled him out, but his legs were gone and—"

"Knock it off. Maybe I should have left you on the boat. Or back in Barbados." He gave us each our portion of that frown-and-grin routine again, then continued. "Well, the father died, and Roberto came to me with this manuscript. He'd found it in with the old man's effects.

Didn't know what it was—neither he nor the father could read English.”

“You keep talking about a manuscript,” I said. “Just what is it, really?”

“Actually, it's a sort of a journal.”

“Written by an old Spanish prisoner on old Spanish parchment, and watermarked 1924, in Yonkers?”

“Nothing like that. And it isn't your treasure-ship yarn, either.” He leaned across the table. “Look here. I'm no brain, but I wouldn't sail a crew of five all the way down here to this crummy little island unless I was pretty sure there was something in it for me. So you needn't do the needling bit. You want to take a look at it for yourself, come aboard tomorrow morning. Then you can decide if you want in or not.”

I hesitated, thinking of the teddy-bear and the Christmas-tree angel, and how I'd come all this way just to avoid playing with toys again. I had resolved that.

On the other hand, I could use some extra money—for eating, and for drinking, too. Drinking helped me to forget about teddy-bears and angels.

So I stood up and I bowed politely, and I said, “Yes, it's a date,” to the teddy-bear.

And all the while I couldn't take my eyes off the angel...

At ten o'clock the next morning I sat on the forward deck of *The Rover*, reading *Isaih Horner, Hys Journal: Thyse Beeing A True Acct. Of The Voyage of The Black Star; 1711 Anno Domino*.

Don had told the truth. It wasn't a Spanish manuscript at all; it was written in the quaint and barbarous English of a semi-literate seaman in the first years of the eighteenth century. The crabbed handwriting was atrocious, the spelling and grammar worse, and no forger would have been inspired to disguise his bait with a long, rambling preliminary account of a sea-voyage.

I'll make no attempt to reproduce the contents of the journal, but it was obviously genuine. Isaih Horner had been second mate of the *Black Star* during what he smugly described as a “trading voyage” to the Isthmus and the northern coast of Venezuela—but it took no great perception to realize that the principal business of the vessel was armed piracy. Indeed, Captain Barnaby Jakes, his commander; bears a name well-known to anyone who has ever followed the history

of the Brotherhood of the Coast; and there were a number of references to meetings with other gentlemen familiar to students of buccaneer lore. Moreover, the *Black Star* did no "trading"; instead, it "confiscated" the property of several Spanish and Portuguese ships which it intercepted *en route* from the Isthmus.

But the big prize was the *Santa Maria*—not Columbus' vessel, but a namesake, built well over a hundred years later in Spanish shipyards to convey the wealth of the New World to the coffers of His Most Christian Majesty.

The captain had learned that the *Santa Maria* was departing for Spain on its annual voyage, laden with a most unusual cargo of booty—the fruit of no less than three forays during which the *conquistadores* had penetrated far more deeply than ever before into the jungles south of Venezuela, in what is now known as the Amazon backwaters. A civilization had been ravished; not the Inca, but a valley people, worshipping a deity of their own and offering it sacrifice on an altar of beaten gold. The altar and the trappings of the temples constituted the sole

"treasure"—but from rumored accounts, this was enough. There was, for example, a huge golden "chest" or "ark" which had been transported on the long march to the coast by no less than forty captured native slaves. Just why the gold had not been melted down into portable ingots on the spot was not made clear, except that the accounts mentioned a certain *padre* accompanying the expedition who insisted that the artifacts of pagan religion be kept intact. Indeed, there was some confusion as to whether or not he approved of removing the temple's contents at all; apparently there had been actual conflict with the commander of the expedition, and a number of men had died during the return journey to Spain.

But that was not important. What mattered was that the booty had been placed aboard the *Santa Maria*, in the deep hold designed for the conveyance of such cargoes, and the ship was sailing for Spanish waters, accompanied by a convoy of two lighter escort vessels, fully-armed for protection against piratical marauders.

All this had Isaih Horner's commander learned; and so, apparently, had a number of

other freebooters whose spies were active in the ports.

Normally, Captain Barnaby Jakes would not have acted upon this knowledge. The *Black Star*, with its twelve small guns and its mongrel crew of forty, preyed on smaller game; there were few members of the Brotherhood, even those equipped with a fleet of larger vessels, who ever dared attack a full-sized galleon, let alone one accompanied by an armed and alert escort. For pirates, despite the romantic lore and legend accumulating about their exploits through the centuries, were not lions in courage. They could more aptly be compared to jackals, or at best, hyenas. They sought out the defenseless, the crippled ships, the wrecks, and by the eighteenth century the days of the great early commanders—Henry Morgan, L'Olonnais and their like—were past. The true "buccaneers" of the Indies had vanished; those who remained would seldom board an armed brigantine, let alone sack a city.

So Captain Barnaby Jakes had no intention of attempting to intercept the *Santa Maria* and her sister ships. Not until he heard of the storm.

A small sloop drifted up out of southern waters, and he rescued—and later slew—its two surviving crew-members. But not before he had their eye-witness accounts of the great tempest in which they saw the *Santa Maria* riding the waves alone, after one of her escort ships foundered and the other was sent careening off its course.

The *Santa Maria*, crippled and alone, would have to put in at the nearest port now. And that would be the island of Santa Rita. If she could be caught in open waters—

The *Black Star* bore south for Santa Rita.

Isaih Horner, writing in his *Journal*, spoke piously enough of "the duties of a subject of Hys Mafestie" to harass the Papish Enemy and take legitimate spoils. But it was an expedition of piracy, impure and simple, and it might have succeeded, for they bore down on the *Santa Maria* just outside Santa Rita harbor.

The only trouble was, another "subject of Hys Mafestie" had found her first.

Closing in on her, cutting across her bows as she wallowed towards the safety of the shore, was a vessel which both Captain Jakes and mate Isaih Horner recognized immediately as the pride of one

Ned Thatch, *alias* Edward Teach, *alias* Blackbeard. Because of a strict *punctilio* observed among the Brotherhood—and because Blackbeard's ship was easily twice the size and carried three times the guns of the little *Black Star*, there was nothing to do but stand by and watch the battle.

The *Santa Maria* had lost a mast in the storm, and its rudder did not function properly. Apparently most of its guns were out of commission, too, for while it fired defensive salvos as it lumbered along, there was not enough threat in its volleys to prevent Blackbeard from heading her off from the harbor entrance. The big galleon was forced to hug the shore and make for another opening along the coast of the island. Blackbeard followed, closing in without firing. That was ever his way—to hold his fire until almost alongside, and then let a direct volley rake the hull and then the decks.

Not until the *Santa Maria* had almost gained the shelter of the cove at the far side of the island did this opportunity occur. Blackbeard closed in quickly, then stood about for a direct broadside. It came, with a roar. The great galleon rocked and shuddered.

The gunners reloaded for a second salvo, even more shattering than the first. The *Santa Maria*, riding low in the water, attempted to turn. A foremast toppled in a shroud of smoke. Now was the time to close in for the kill—grappling irons were ready, the boarding-pikes mustered. If enough shots had penetrated the vitals of the ship, it would sink within five or six hours; but a boarding-party could secure surrender and transfer the treasure long before then. Blackbeard, presumably, was ready to lead the attack; as was his usual custom, he'd be lighting the candles he'd twisted into his beard, and carrying the pots of brimstone he hurled before boarding the enemy's deck. One more broadside, now—

It came. And the *Santa Maria* rolled with the blast, then careened tipsily to one side.

According to eyewitness Isaih Horner, watching from the deck of the *Black Star* at a distance of less than a mile away, the shots were directed at the top-deck of the galleon. But it was as though the entire discharge of thirty ship's cannons had simultaneously penetrated the vessel below the waterline, as if something

had ripped the keel out of the Spanish ship.

For with a roaring and a roiling, with a great tidal tremor, the *Santa Maria* sank like a plummet before his very eyes. The water shot up from the opened hatchways, "lyke a verritable fountin" and Blackbeard, instead of boarding, hastily sheered off to avoid being caught in the almost instantaneous vortex of a whirlpool set up by the downward plunge of the great galleon. Within the space of two minutes the *Santa Maria* was gone. It had sunk into the waters of Cut-throat Cove.

The *Journal* did not end here. It told of how Blackbeard and Captain Barnaby Jakes made common ground in a salvage attempt, but were unable to send men down into the deep water to reach the vessel. There were several survivors whose accounts were reported and paraphrased—none of them could explain why the ship had so suddenly and inexplicably perished, except in terms of sailors' superstitions. It had been a "black voyage" and there was a "curse" upon the ship; they should not have carried the treasures of a "heathen temple." Isaih Horner had small patience with

these notions—neither did Blackbeard or Captain Jakes. Being somewhat short of rations, and even more short of temper after the loss of such a prize, they merely slit the throats of the Spanish seamen and sent them down to follow their fellows.

It was impossible to land at Santa Rita—the Spanish garrison would undoubtedly be sending out vessels of its own against the intruders—so Blackbeard and the *Black Star* went their separate ways.

Isaih Horner's *Journal* ended abruptly, a few pages later. He'd put in at Kingston, Jamaica, and was thinking of giving up "the life of a mariner."

"And that's just what he did," Don told me, as I laid the manuscript down on top of the oiled pouch in which it had been preserved. "I guess he turned to robbery on land. Anyway, when I tried to trace down what had become of him, I found out that an Isaih Horner was hanged for purse-snatching in the Government Docks in 1712."

"Then you checked on all this?" I asked.

"Of course I did. I told you I hadn't come down here on a wild goose chase. Found out

everything I could. About the *Santa Maria*, the storm, the sinking. It's in the records."

"What about the treasure?"

"There isn't much. But it stands to reason that it existed. They never sent a galleon back to Spain with an escort unless it was loaded. Besides, this story of Hörner's impressed me a lot more because it spoke about an altar and temple trappings instead of the usual guff—you know, gold bullion, chests of jewels, stuff like that. There wasn't any such thing anyway, except during the early days when the Spaniards went after the Aztecs and the Inca tribes."

"But if it's in the records, then why didn't others try salvaging the ship?"

"They did. Trouble is, it's in fairly deep water—I'd say somewhere between two hundred and three hundred feet. And up until a dozen years ago, it was impossible to dive that far safely, or to do any work at such a depth. Now we have the technique and the equipment. And we have the details we need. Five hundred yards offshore, just east of the Cove entrance."

"How would you lift up an altar, or a heavy chest?"

"We'd have to go back for

a big rig. What I want to do now is locate the wreck. That's a job in itself—have you any idea what happens to a boat that has been under water for almost two hundred and fifty years? Just finding its topmasts above the silt is hard enough to do." Don shrugged. "But that's no concern of yours. What I want is a little help from you in handling the local authorities. Explain what we're here for, that we're a research expedition, interested in salvaging historical relics. You don't need to mention the gold."

"I see."

Don eyed me. "Well, why should you? It isn't *their* property, is it? The laws of salvage—"

"According to the laws of salvage, you'd need a government permit to start work; not from here but from the mainland."

"All right, so I didn't make arrangements. Why can't you go to the mayor or whatever the head man calls himself and just get his okay? You can handle him. And I'm willing to spend a few bucks."

"How much?"

"How much do you think it will take?"

"Well, a hundred dollars is a fortune down here."

"That's pretty reasonable."

He nodded. "I'll go another couple of hundred for you, if you can sew it up. What we want is permission to dive over at the Cove, without any interference from the natives. Nobody should be allowed to hang around. Get it?"

Got it!"

"How long do you think it'll take to line up the deal?"

"I can probably see Jose Robales this morning. He's the mayor of Santa Rita; the inland villages have *jefes* of their own, but they don't count. I should have word for you before the day is over."

"Make it in writing."

"Will do." I held out my hand. "He'll expect payment in advance."

"Right." Don reached into his jacket, pulled out his wallet. He extracted three one-hundred-dollar bills quite casually.

I was equally casual, an hour later, when I flipped one of the bills to Jose Robales in his little office near the waterfront. He signed the permit with a flourish.

"Remember," he told me, "I take your word for it that these people will not create problems here. You are to observe them as my representative and see that the crew keeps away from the village at the Cove."

"I understand. I'll keep an eye on them, I promise."

"That is good. Then there will be no trouble, no?"

"There will be no trouble, no," I echoed.

But I was wrong . . .

The trouble came almost ten days later, when Don finally located the ship.

He'd moved to the area outside the Cove immediately, of course, and anchored in fifty fathoms, five hundred yards out. Roberto and Juan Perez—another crew-member—assisted him in the actual diving operations, while the other three attended to arrangements topside. They put down a heavy shot-line, with handholds, and it hit bottom at two hundred and sixty feet. Nobody got down that far until the third day; it takes time to get accustomed to such depths. And even when they managed to reach the ocean floor, that didn't locate the vessel for them. As Don explained, the ship itself would be covered with silt and almost undetectable. The shifting of the sands, the alteration of the shoreline itself through the long years; these factors added to the problem. It would take time and patience.

I came out every day; I

beached a rowboat on the shore of the Cove and it wasn't a long pull. I sat there and watched the operations. After they hit bottom, Don did most of the diving himself. Every second dive, he'd haul anchor and try a new location. By the time a week had passed they'd explored an area several hundred yards in circumference without finding a thing. But Don wasn't discouraged yet—just tired.

Dena was bored.

I'd sit with her on the deck of the yacht while Don was diving, and listen to her complain. She didn't care if Roberto and the others overheard her; actually, they were much too busy up forward to pay any attention to us.

"Pleasure trip!" she murmured. "He hauls me way off here to the middle of nowhere, and for what? To sit on my fanny out in the hot sun all day long while he's down there playing footsie with the fishes. Then at night he's tired, wants to turn in right away—not that there's anything else to do for excitement over on that crummy island of yours. A big nothing, that's all it is."

"Then why did you come along in the first place?"

Dena shrugged.

"Did he promise you a share of the treasure?"

"In a way." She scowled at me. "Not that it's any of your business."

"You in love with him?"

"That isn't any of your business, either."

"All right. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be. I can take care of myself."

"So I notice."

"You notice a lot, don't you?"

"It's my business. I'm a writer, remember?"

"I'll bet you are." She lit a cigarette. "What would a writer want in a nowhere like this place?"

"Now *you're* getting personal," I told her. "But I *am* a writer. I've got books and stuff up at the house to prove it. Want to see them?"

"I've seen books already, thanks. Also etchings."

"That isn't what I had in mind."

"Don't kid me. I haven't met a man since I was fifteen who had anything else in mind. They always want to show me something. When I came aboard Don's boat back in Barbados, he was going to show me the portable bar."

"Then why did you accept his invitation, if you knew the way it would turn out?"

"Maybe I wanted it to turn out that way."

"Then you *are* in love with him."

"Shut up!" She turned away, tossing her cigarette over the side. It arced down and hissed into the waves. "All right, what's the sense of putting on an act? When I was eighteen I was singing with a band. I had a contract with MCA and a chance to do a TV show, just a summer replacement deal on sustaining, but they told me it could build into something big if I got a few breaks. That was seven years ago, and I'm still waiting for the breaks. I haven't been with MCA for a long time, and I haven't done any television, either. Six months ago I got a chance to play a night-spot in Havana. It wasn't a very good one, but the one in Port-au-Prince was worse, and the one in Trinidad was just plain lousy. I ended up in Barbados without a job, and without a dime. Then Don Hanson came along with his boat. I didn't care what kind of a guy he was or what kind of a boat he had. I wanted out. So, as the sun sinks in the west, we say farewell to beautiful Barbados. End of story."

"You don't really like him, do you?"

"I hate his guts. He's the kind of a guy who's always had plenty of money and is still greedy for more. He's the kind of a guy who always had plenty of muscles, but still has to use them to show off—and to push other people around. As far as he's concerned, I'm not even a person; just another convenience he wanted to take along on the trip, like his portable bar."

"Then why don't you—"

"What? Ditch him and come with you to your island paradise? Don't give me that, chum. You've got nothing to offer. But nothing." The blue eyes were level. "I didn't ask you for your sad story, but I'll bet I already know it. There was a girl in it, wasn't there? And another guy, who took her away, while you sat mooning around. I've met your kind before—the sensitive intellectual type, isn't it? Which is just another way of saying you don't have any guts. I told you I hated Don's guts, but at least he *has* some. Enough to go out after what he wants. He'd never ask me to pull a sneak on another man; he'd fight him for me. Would you fight Don? Not in a million years!"

I sighed. "You're right," I said. "And very honest."

"I shouldn't have said that," she told me. "If I was really honest, I'd admit I'm not worth fighting for. Not any more."

"Suppose I think differently. Suppose I'm willing to fight?"

"You couldn't win." She sighed again, and lighted another cigarette. "Guys like you can never win. This is a money - and - muscle world. Them as has, gits. Even if the prize is only a beat-up bleached blonde with a bad case of the whim-whams. Oh, let's forget it, shall we?"

I was going to tell her that I wouldn't forget it, that I preferred an angel who admitted truthfully to a little tarnish, and that maybe both of us were a bit too cynical and defeatist for our own good.

But I never got the opportunity.

Because suddenly there was a commotion up forward, and a babble of excited Spanish. Don was coming up—he was clinging to the shot-line twenty feet down, spending five minutes in stage decompression before being hauled aboard. His body was perfectly visible in the clear water; the weird fins, the goggles, the cylinder-assembly and

regulator on his back all part of an eerie ensemble.

We waited patiently until he tugged three times, giving the signal for hauling up the line. Roberto and Juan hoisted him to the deck. He stood there, shivering slightly, while they unstrapped his equipment. Then he took off his goggles and grinned.

"I've found it," he said.

"No—are you sure?"

"Positive." He nodded, reaching for a towel. "And it's better than we could have hoped for. Went down on its side, right into a big rock crevice that protected the top-deck from silting. Part of the deck itself is still clear, and I could see what's left of the masts and forward cabin. We ought to be able to clear a path inside almost immediately—just chop a hole in the hull." He turned to Roberto. "But don't take my word for it! Here, I want you to go down and take a look for yourself, right now. And then Juan. The sooner all three of us have had a look at her and compared notes, the better. Got your stuff?"

Roberto nodded, then hurried below. By the time Don had towelled himself back to warmth, taken a shot of brandy and accepted a cigarette, Roberto was already

lowering himself over the side.

We watched him disappear along the shot-line, going down into the water.

Dena was excited. "What's it look like?" she asked. "Can you really see anything down there?"

Don lifted his head impatiently. "Of course you can," he told her. "It gets quite dark about halfway, but once you actually hit the bottom there's a lot of reflected sunlight; it seems to penetrate the dark, transparent area above. The light is bluish, but you can make out objects quite easily. I recognized the boat at once, even though it doesn't look much like a galleon any more."

"Everything's covered with slime, eh?" I asked.

"Slime? Whatever gave you that idea?" Don stared at me. "Trouble with you writers—you get everything out of books. Make a few dives yourself and you'd find out differently. There's no slime. The wood is just about eaten away and the metal structure is just a skeleton. Lots of little marine animals covering it. And fish everywhere—millions of 'em. You know, I may even have guessed wrong about the hull; maybe there's only the iron hasps and what

I thought was wood was just a solid mass of fish. They like to swarm where there's some protection. Roberto should be able to tell us more when he comes back."

"It takes a long time to make a dive, doesn't it?"

"Going down is easy, if you're carrying a shot like he is. But coming back is slow work. You have to make at least three stops for decompression, to avoid the bends." There was a waterproof watch strapped to Don's wrist. He parted the golden fuzz and glanced at it. "I'd say he's due up again in about fifteen minutes. Should just be at the first stage of decompression now, about fifty feet under." He went over to the rail where the rest of the crew was gathered. "See anything yet?" he asked.

"No," Juan told him.

"Well, he ought to give the first signal soon."

We watched the rope, but it remained taut.

"Fifteen minutes," Don muttered to himself.

But it wasn't fifteen minutes. It was less than one minute later that Juan shouted, "Here he come!" and he wasn't pointing along the shot-line either, but far off-side, beyond the rail.

"You're crazy!" Don grunted. "That's some damn fish, surfacing."

"No—is Roberto!" Juan said.

I stared. What broke water certainly wasn't a fish, for fish lack arms and legs, and they do not wear apparatus on their backs.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Juan cried. "Is Roberto!"

It was Roberto, all right, but I'd never have recognized him floating there in the water, his body swollen and distorted grotesquely by the change in pressure. Nor was that the worst of it.

Roberto's body had come up from the wreck below. But it no longer had a head . . .

"Of course it wasn't a shark," Don said. "No shark could bite like that. Besides, the way it was sheared off—"

He kept his voice low, even though Dena had gone below to her bunk.

"How about a squid?" I asked. "I've read about the way the big ones hole up in wrecks down there."

"You've read!" He gave me a pitying look. "Maybe you'd better read a little more. A squid isn't the answer, either. There isn't any kind of marine creature that could take a man's head off clean at the

shoulders. And that includes whales, in case you also happen to have read *Moby Dick*."

Don glanced at the body lying on the deck, covered with a tarpaulin. "No, the answer's not a fish or an animal, either. Roberto must have left the line and gone off to explore the wreck. And my guess about the fish is probably right. There is no solid hull left, only a framework. When Roberto reached the wreck, the fish swam off. My guess is that he tried to enter what's left of the ship, swimming between the ribs. And then—"

He drew a finger across his throat. It wasn't a pleasant gesture, but it was extremely graphic.

"But how could that do it?" I persisted. "I don't pretend to know the way those old boats were put together, but if they used iron, surely it was in big pieces. There wouldn't be any razor edges to worry about."

Don shrugged. "Do you know what happens to metal after it's been under water for a few hundred years? It wears down, eventually just crumbles away. Gold wouldn't, but old iron—"

"Then how could it be so sharp, and how would it hold up to slice a man's head from

his shoulders just because he swam against it?"

"I don't know. But we'll find out tomorrow. Juan and I will go down."

He was only partially correct.

They buried Roberto at sunset, and I didn't stick around after the simple ceremony. That's just as well, because I heard about it the next morning.

If the sharks hadn't taken Roberto's head, they got their consolation-prize. Even though the body had been carefully wrapped and weighted down with shot, they must have found him, because they had been swimming around the yacht all night, their long cold bodies gleaming as they surfaced and snapped their teeth in the moonlight. It hadn't been a pleasant evening.

I could tell that when I looked at Dena's face the next day, and the crew's reaction was even more apparent.

As for Don, he was agitated only by anger.

"They're grumbling," he murmured, as he led me down into the cabin, out of earshot of those on deck. "Want me to turn back, chuck the whole thing. I don't know who started it, but then all these Ne-

groes are like children. Giving me a lot of jazz about curses and hoodoos." He sighed. "But that's not the worst of it. Juan won't dive any more. He absolutely refuses to go down."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Do? I can turn back, the way they want me to, and come here again with a fresh crew. But that's a waste of time and money. Dammit, I found the wreck! A few more trips down and I'll have all the data I need on what it'll take to bring up the treasure."

"If it's really there."

"That's just the point—I intend to find out. This is no time to stop."

"You can still dive, yourself."

"Yes, but it isn't a good idea to do it alone, at that depth, unless there's someone else standing by in case of emergencies. Not that there'll be any; now that I know what to expect, I won't get caught the way Roberto was. Still, I need someone to rely on."

"Have you tried offering Juan more money?"

"Certainly! I told him I'd pay him Roberto's wages in addition to his own. But he's scared spitless."

Dena clambered down the

ladder. "So what's the story?" she asked, listlessly. "We leaving Nature's wonderland?"

"Looks as though we'll have to," Don told her. "Unless—" He paused, eyeing me. "Unless you could help out."

"Me?"

"Why not? You could learn to dive. I could teach you in three days. Nothing to it, with a regulator, and we've got all of Roberto's equipment. I'd make it worth your while—"

"No thanks," I said. "Don't mention money. I've got a poor head for figures, but at least it's still on my shoulders. Which is more than you can say for Roberto's."

"I'd cut you in on the salvage," Don said. "We'd split on the gold. Think of it, a solid gold altar, and a golden chest so big it took half a dozen men to carry it."

Dena smiled. "Never mind the sales-talk," she said. "Can't you see he just isn't the outdoor type?"

I don't know if it was *that* that did it, or the realization that unless I agreed she'd be sailing away. But all at once I heard myself saying, "Why not? At least I can give it a try."

That shut her up in a hurry, and it made Don start

talking. Within a matter of minutes it was all arranged. He'd abandon his project for the next few days and devote all his time to instructing me. We'd start inland, near the beach at the Cove, and then I'd get into deeper water. First with the shot-line and then alone, gradually learning how to handle myself in the depths.

And that's just the way it worked out.

There's no need to give a detailed account of what it's like to learn skin-diving. The sea holds a lot of surprises, but your own body holds still more. I'd never have believed I could undergo the amount of pressure I experienced in the increasing scope of my descents, or endure the cold. I learned how to accomplish the necessary decompression, how to walk and swim and handle my limbs under weird gravitational alterations. And I learned, still more importantly, that I was not afraid. For the first time I really understood the fascination of skin-diving as a hobby, or as the avocation or vocation of men like Clarke and Costeau.

Don was a good, if impatient instructor. And more than his grudging praise, I relished the reluctant admira-

tion of Dena. Thus stimulated, I underwent a rapid apprenticeship.

By the morning of the fifth day, I was ready to stand by and handle the line while Don dived. The crew seemed to have settled down into a state of morose resignation once more, and there were no difficulties.

I watched Don adjust his helmet and fins and clamber over the side. Dena leaned over the rail at my elbow and we traced the trail of bubbles rising through the translucent water. Then we waited.

Almost an hour passed before Don reappeared on the line at the twenty-foot decompression stage. He stayed so long that I went down myself, gesturing to him in the water. He signalled for me to leave, with a wave of his hand. I came up again.

"Is he all right?" Dena asked.

"I guess so. But he's certainly in no hurry to come up."

Finally, though, he emerged. The fins, the tanks, the helmet came off. He took a towel, sank into a deck-chair, and his usually ruddy face was unnaturally pale in the mid-day sun.

"What's the matter?" I muttered.

"Nothing. Nitrogen narcosis."

I nodded. He'd explained it to me—the nitrogen intoxication which sometimes affects the central nervous system after one relies on the air-supply from the tanks during long dives to great depths. It brings on anaesthesia, hallucinations, and all sorts of odd reactions, but disappears when the diver decompresses.

"Took a long time to wear off," Don continued. "Hit me so suddenly I wasn't really aware of it. At first I thought the men were right about their squid, or whatever they think is down there in the wreck."

"You reached it?"

"Yes. And there is no hull, as I suspected; just masses of fish clustering almost solidly around the crevice where the ship settled. Inside there's bits of wood and metal still leaving a partial skeleton, but all the heavy stuff—the guns and the spars—is sunken into the sand. Over at one side there's a big bulge. I'd swear it's the altar and the chest we're looking for, but I never got to examine them.

"Because that's when I began to feel funny. The water seemed to be turning black. The first idea I had was about

the squid, so I scuttled out of there. And when I turned around to take a look, the whole area seemed to be not only black, but boiling. Clouds of bubbles. Fish, of course, returning to the spot. And they'd churned up the silt. But at the time I would have sworn there was some big animal coming up from under the wreckage. Then, when I saw Roberto's head bobbing around in the center of the black stuff, I realized what was wrong with me. I was drunk as a coot. So I came back up on the rope. I was so woozy I almost forgot to let go of the weights."

"Did you find the place where Roberto had his accident?"

"No, I didn't. Maybe you can when you go down."

"You mean—?"

"Why not? No reason why you shouldn't get used to it. I won't tackle it again today, so it's your turn. Maybe you can get closer than I did. Just remember to watch out for the nitrogen when it hits you. Chances are it won't, though."

Dena shook her head. "He shouldn't risk it," she said. "After all, he's just learning, and it's over two hundred feet. You told me yourself

it calls for an experienced diver—"

"Only one way to get experience, isn't there?" I said. "I'm ready."

And I was, the moment I heard the veiled concern in Dena's voice.

I lowered my mask over the side, dipping it in the water so that no mist would cloud the inner surface of the goggles. Juan strapped the cylinder blocks of the regulator to my back and looped the hose over my head as I fitted the rubber mask until it moulded tightly to my face. I gripped the mouthpiece between my lips as Juan hung ten pounds in weights to my belt. I adjusted my fins, picked up a spear, then went over the side, grasping the rope with my left hand as I lowered myself into the water.

It was cold. Gradually I felt my body adjusting to the temperature and the pressure, just as my eyes adjusted to the deeper gloom. Bubbles burst around me and fish swam past. My lungs ached. I straightened to a horizontal position so that intake and exhaust were equalized at the same pressure level and the regulator would function properly. It was hard not to panic; to remember, in effect, that the demand

regulator was doing my breathing for me, or at least supplying the air which my constricted lungs needed as I flailed my way down. The pressure grew stronger, my movements correspondingly slower. Here in the deeper darkness I began to feel drunk—nitrogen narcosis was not the cause, merely the gravitational change. My ears and sinuses ached, and I swallowed until the pain eased. A school of small fish glided by. I was tempted to abandon the shot-line and follow them. But no, the line was my guide to the treasure below. I went down, deeper into the darkness.

Not enough nitrogen had entered my bloodstream to produce any side-effects. All I had to worry about was the pressure. How far down was I? Close to two hundred feet, probably. It was hard to move, now; hard to hold the spear. I wanted to rest for a while, to float.

The water here was dark. Only the bubbles from the regulator retained any color—they were round and yellowish, like beads of amber strung endlessly upwards from here to the surface. So far to the surface up there. So cold down here.

And getting colder now.

Because I was descending again. Deeper and deeper. Darker and darker. Colder and colder. *Down went McGinty—*

Drunk. All right, so I was drunk. But that was good, because I couldn't feel the pain any more. My ears had stopped hurting. The cold didn't bother me, now. And it was easy to continue, to go all the way down. All the way down to where the treasure lay—the golden altar.

And then I saw the rock crevice, saw the great solid swarm of fish packed in a writhing mass and rising up like the dim drowned outline of a ghostly galleon. And I left the line and wriggled forward, moving like a fish myself. A swordfish, with a spear. They fled before me, these little ones. I was Neptune, scattering my subjects. Make way for the king! *King of the Sea.*

Drunken diver, rather. Or was it drunken driver? Could they arrest you for drunken diving? Fine you twenty clams?

I tried to clear my mind. Mustn't go on like that. Had to be careful, avoid running into whatever it was that sheared off poor Roberto's head. Funny way to die. Most

men lost their heads over a woman—

And then I saw her.

I saw the woman.

She was standing perhaps fifty feet to my left, away from the crevice and the wreck. It was the glint of light that first caught my eye; a reflection brighter than anything else here in the murky dimness. I thought it might be the sunlight glinting from the scales of a large fish, and I turned my head, and I saw.

Saw the black hair floating free in a mane that masked the face. Saw the sudden movement of her body as she turned and waved the cutlass. The gleaming cutlass, razor-sharp—

Women do not walk the ocean floor brandishing cutlasses. I realized that, but my awareness was only partial. Because another part of me was whispering, *now you know. Now you know what cut off Roberto's head.*

And then she saw me, and the black mane whipped back, revealing her face. It was a blob of greenish-white gristle with four gaping holes; two black sockets, a jagged nasal septum, and a grinning maw that parted now as a tiny fish wriggled out.

And it wasn't the skull that frightened me, it wasn't the sight of a corpse walking here at the bottom of the sea. It was just the hideous, grotesque inconsequence of the little fish swimming out of the dead mouth.

That's what I was afraid of, and that's what I remembered as I pulled in panic for the shot-line. As I struggled to release the weights I dropped my spear and stared. The figure wavered off in the distance, disappearing into the crevice where the ship lay. And now the black bubbles were rising, cascading in clouds from the spot. Through the turbulence I could see the skull-face melting and blending, and I saw another face that could have been Roberto's, and yet others—brown, bearded, grimacing faces that formed out of bubbling blackness and disappeared in inky incoherence.

Then I was going up the line, not remembering to move slowly, but propelled by the panic, flailing forward in frantic fear.

At the fifty-foot level I forced myself to stop and wait. The water below was clear and no inchoate ichor rose about me. I counted slowly, then climbed again. Twenty feet now—another five

minutes and I'd be free. Free and safe. But what if I waited, and something came after me? *What if it was following me, crawling along the line?*

My lungs were bursting. My head was bursting. Not with pressure, but with fright. I couldn't wait any more, I couldn't stand it, I had to get out, I *had* to—

I kicked and released myself, straining upwards, striving for the sun. My head broke water and I could see the light, feel it all about me.

Then it dissolved into darkness and I went down again, down into the black bubbles . . .

It was Don who hauled me out. I learned it later, when I opened my eyes and found myself lying on the deck.

"Don't try to talk," Dena said.

I nodded. I had neither the strength nor the desire. It was a good twenty minutes and two shots of rum later before I was able to sit in a deck-chair and tell my story.

Don shook his head. "Nitrogen narcosis," he said. "You had it worse than I."

"But the corpse with the cutlass—Roberto's head—"

"Hallucinations."

"Yes, but how?" I thought about it for a moment. "Was

it the manuscript that set me off? The part about the pirates? Did I subconsciously remember Mary Read and Anne Bonney and the other females who sailed in Blackbeard's day?"

"You must have," Don told me.

"But we both saw Roberto."

"We were both thinking about him, and what happened down there."

"Well, what *did* happen, do you suppose?"

Don sighed. "Perhaps we can find out tomorrow."

"You're not going down again?" Dena asked.

"Of course I am. One more trip and I should be able to locate that altar, and the chest. A few fish churning up the silt aren't going to scare me away." He grinned at me. "Tell you what. If you're so concerned about my welfare, I'll take Howard along tomorrow for a guardian. We'll both go down. What'dya say?"

What could I say, with Dena watching me? I nodded, reluctantly. I didn't really want to go down into that deeper darkness again.

And that night, when the dreams came, I was left with still less desire to return to the wreck.

The dreams came, and I lay tossing in my bed in the old house on the hillside above the winding waterfront of Santa Rita. I knew I was there, in my bed, but at the same time I was once again writhing in deep waters.

In my dreams I swam down to the wreckage, wriggled into the crevice where the black bubbles churned, and scraped at the sand with my spear until the point wedged against a solid object. It was the chest; of course, and I could detect the outline of the heavy lid set solid on the massive golden container. I sought to brush away the encrustation of corrosion and fungoid growth and gaze upon the gold beneath, but as I reached out the lid began to rise. It swung open slowly, and the blackness seeped out; the black bubbles burst like bloating blossoms. And they were not bubbles, but heads, and each head had a face, and each face had a mouth, and each mouth was gaping wide to greet me with a grotesque grimace. Yet these were only smoky bubbles, ghost-faces floating there in the water—the broad, flat faces of savages, the bearded faces of *hidalgos* and Spanish mariners, the seamed and pitted

countenances of corsairs; yes, and here was Roberto again, and the woman. The dark cloud floated forth, and it was like a great black bush bearing heads for fruit; a strange undersea growth waving there in the dim depths, growing before my eyes. And now the bush put forth fresh branches, and the branches were long and waving; a writhing mass of titanic tentacles. Still the smoke poured out, and billowed forth, and now I perceived that there was a body beneath the nightmare nebulosity of faces and feelers; a black body that was like a squid, a sea-serpent, a reptilian monster spawned in the dawn of pre-history when Nature shaped strange simulacra from primeval slime. And beneath the seething, shifting smokiness of that amorphous and polymorphous presence there were real eyes—real eyes that glowed and glared and glinted at me. But they were *more* than eyes; they were mouths as well. Yes, they were mouths, for I could see the pupils gape and the lids rolled back like lips, and I knew that the eyes would devour me, they would ingest me in their hunger, incorporate my essence into the black being of that incredible body so that I too would take

my place as one of the scores of shifting shapes in the smoke which emanated from it.

It was one and it was many, it was a composite creature of an incorruptible corruption; it was insanity incarnate.

I screamed and fled from it, but the faces and the feelers flowed forth to envelop me in ichorous essence, so that I drowned in the bubbling blackness of its being. I was consumed by it.

And then there was no fear, and no revulsion, for in its place came an overwhelming expansion of awareness, so that I became a part of *it* and I knew. My memory was *its* memory, my knowledge was *its* knowledge. And my hunger was *its* hunger—

Memory.

Deep in the jungle they built the temple and reared a golden altar of worship. And behind the golden altar was the great golden ark in which I rested and waited for the sacrifice. Nor did I wait too long, for they came frequently to attend me, bringing me the captives of their warfare, trussed on poles like pigs. And when there were no captives they brought me slaves,

and when there were no slaves they brought me children, and when there were no children they brought me their choicest virgins. All I devoured in the darkness, incorporating far more than flesh—for I took from living things the continuity of their consciousness and added their awareness to mine. So that I grew and grew, eternally enlarging. For I was that which is known in all legends; the creature of darkness which devours the world. And if I were not fed, if my appetite were not appeased, I would flow forth to raven freely as I had—long aeons ago, or was it yesterday, or would it be tomorrow? But if they kept me sated, I was content to dwell in the temple. And when they built the ark I entered it willingly, nor did I try to leave, for it was pleasant to curl and coil and coalesce in the darkness and wait for them to bring me fresh fare. I remembered, now . . .

Knowledge.

Time is a rushing river that flows endlessly, yet never reaches the sea. And it is pleasant to drift upon the stream, drift drowsily and content. So that when I coiled compactly in the golden chest,

I willed myself to satiated sleep. And it was then that they hammered down the lid, so that I could not escape; hammered it fast to hold me captive, and put an end to sacrifice. But I was still aware; I knew when the armored white strangers came and prevailed over my worshippers, and I endured as they sought to pry open the lid of the great chest, and then abandoned their vain efforts to talk of fire and of melting down. Finally there was talk of a golden gift to their ruler and in the end the chest was borne away to the ship, together with the altar of sacrifice. I did not stir or struggle, for I anticipated the nearing moment when the chest *would* be opened again, and I could feast. Feast on flesh, feast on spirit. Yes, I knew, now . . .

Hunger.

I drowed in the darkness, and then the thunder came, and the shattering sound awakened me. I felt the shock and the shudder as the sinking ship gave way and I fell into the depths; the lid of the chest burst and I was free. Yet I did not come forth, for there was no reason. Not until the bodies drifted down, sinking slowly. Then I put

forth a portion of myself, bubbling out from the lid and groping until I grasped the floating forms and drew them to me. I feasted until replete, then slept once more. There was no need to emerge from the chest until the opportunity came to feed again. Time means nothing, for I endure forever. I have but to wait. I neither dwindle nor grow; nothing grows except the hunger.

But the hunger is there, and lately I have stirred, heeding its pangs. The other day I took a man—it was curious, in that he came to me willingly and saw the chest with its lid ajar. He could not lift it, of course, because of the weight of the water, but he felt along the edges. Then I bubbled forth, grasping him and pulling him down, and he threshed mightily so that the lid fell, decapitating him. The body floated away, but I did not pursue. I do not have to pursue. I am aware of his awareness now, and with it I know that there are others of his kind in a ship, just above me. They will follow him down, for they are seeking the chest and the altar. Yes, they will come to me, and soon I shall feast again.

In the feasting there is great pleasure. To taste the

memories, to savor the surge of every emotion, to know the nuances of all desires; there is the richness of rage, the pungency of passion, the fine, full flavor of frantic fear. I eat it all, and I digest it, and I retain it, and that is *my* ruling need. Most of all I want the woman, the golden woman. And I will engulf her with my eyes, and I will take her whiteness into my blackness, and drain her body of all delight—

"No!" I was screaming now, it was my own voice that was screaming, and it was my own sweat-drenched body that threshed in ultimate fright there upon the bed in the moonlight as I awoke.

It had been a nightmare. I knew that now, and yet I *believed*. No subconscious fantasies can evolve without stimulation, and my stimuli had come from beneath the sea. *I believed*.

But when the harsh sun rose, my certainty wavered. By the time I rowed out to the yacht, I was half-ashamed to even speak about the dream. And when I started to tell Dena and Don of what had shattered my sleep, I was more than apologetic.

"Sure you weren't hitting the rum again?" Don asked.

"No, I didn't touch a drop. But even if it was just a nightmare, I'm convinced there's *something* behind it. That business of the lid coming down to decapitate Roberto—"

"You know yourself what it would weigh, and how slowly it would move in water at that depth."

"Yes, but if something were holding him—"

"What could hold him? Your mysterious monster, made out of black bubbles? The one who lives inside the chest?"

"We saw the bubbles, remember?"

"Sure we did. And we saw the fish that made them, churning up the silt down there in the crevice." Don wiped his forehead with a hairy arm. "Personally, I think you cooked up this yarn because you'd like to chicken out of making a dive with me. You were pretty shook up yesterday, weren't you? Sure you were."

"Leave him alone," Dena said. "The poor guy almost drowned. If he doesn't want to go back down, I don't blame him."

"I'll go," I said. "Don't worry about me."

"Then come on," Don snapped. "Juan has our gear

laid out. The sooner we get started, the better."

We stripped down to our trunks, and I followed the teddy-bear over to the rail in silence. Juan helped us into our equipment. And then it was time to lower ourselves along the shot-line, lower ourselves into the drowned domain of darkness and seek what waited there . . .

Don reached the bottom before me. Spear in hand, he jackknifed through the gloom in the direction of the crevice, then waved a flipper to urge me forward.

The fish did not swarm here today, and we could see the ribs of the skeleton-ship wavering weirdly in the water. And Don swam between them, then lowered himself to the sand as he groped forward, digging his spear into the bulky, buried outline of a shape set against the side of the rocks. Suddenly he flung up a flipper again, gesturing impatiently as I held back. The spear scraped over the encrustations and bubbles rose.

Then I saw the glint and hurried forward. He *had* found something—it was the altar!

There was no way of determining if it had fallen flat-

ly or upended itself in the sand—in either case it was huge; far larger than I'd expected. And its surface, beneath the silt, was hammered, gleaming gold. I peered into Don's face, beneath the goggles, and read the exultation in his eyes.

We'd found what we were looking for.

The cost of rigging up a winch and windlass to raise it from the depths would be tremendous, but the reward was worth the effort. This was a prize surpassing the dreams of any treasure-seeker. And there was still the chest—

Again, it was Don who moved forward, deeper into the debris centered between the ribs of the hulk. He stooped and groped and probed, then rounded a rocky outcropping in the wall of the crevice and literally stumbled across the rectangular lid of the great chest sunken in the sands.

I was beginning to feel faint. Part of it was residual fear, of course, but most of it was sheer excitement at the realization of our discovery.

Whatever the cause, I was conscious of a growing giddiness, and I moved back, not wanting to stray too far away from the shot-line. Don waved at me, but I shook my

head and continued to retreat. Only when I saw the line slanting before me did I halt and gaze off into the crevice.

Don had stooped over the imbedded outline of the lid and now he was digging at it with his spear. I remembered his own remarks about the weight of the water and knew his puny efforts would be futile; perhaps he was beginning to suffer from nitrogen narcosis too.

But no, his attempts were *not* useless! Because even as I watched, the lid was raising. Slowly, very slowly, the sand began to slant and shift beneath the spear. And now I could see an opening inch up, and there was a blackness and a bubbling. It was like the blackness and the bubbling I'd encountered yesterday, during my dive, but there were no fish about to churn the silt. Yet the lid continued to rise, and the darkness flowed forth.

The darkness flowed forth, just as it had in my dream.

And then Don was backing away, and he flailed the spear before him; flailed frantically at the faces that seethed and surged in shapeless shadows. And out of the faces emerged the feelers, coils

of twisting tentacles that shrouded him in smoke. I thought of the legends of the huge *djinn* imprisoned by Solomon in tiny bottles, and I thought of how lambent gases are compressed in minute containers, and I thought of protoplasm that proliferates instantaneously in response to the blind, insensate forces which spawned life out of the insane vortex of chaos when the world began. But this was not *djinn* or gas or protoplasm; it was nightmare. Black nightmare, boiling out of a golden chest at the bottom of the sea, black nightmare that emerged now in sudden, shocking solidity; oozing obscenely aloft until it towered titanically amidst its twining tendrils.

And I saw the central coils part to reveal the eyes, the eyes which were like mouths—which *were* mouths, because they were swallowing Don. The coils whipped him aloft, forced him against the openings, and the lid-lips came down. I could see Don's legs threshing in a blur of bubbles; one of his flippers had come off.

I forced myself forward, spear in hand. But the chest was closing; the tentacles were forcing it down from within. The black, threshing

mass disappeared, carrying the white mass of Don's body with it, and the lid clanged shut. Behind it floated a mass of bubbles, and a tangle of reddish skeins, and something small and curiously white. Don's foot, sheared off at the ankle by the closing lid—

I blacked out.

Half an hour later I found myself gasping and retching on the deck in the warm sunlight. I had no memory of how I came to the surface; apparently Juan had seen me ascend and came down to hold me through the decompression stages. He bent over me, and his brown face was almost as pale as Dena's.

I told them about Don.

In Dena's face I could read only doubt and incredulity, plus a strange compassion. But Juan nodded, slowly.

"We must leave this place," he said.

I shook my head. "But you can't leave now—there's the gold, it's really down there, and it's worth a fortune—"

"What is gold to a dead man?" he murmured. "We will go back to Barbados."

"Wait!" I begged. "We've got to think things over. Dena, you understand—"

"Yes." She turned to Juan. "We can't decide anything

now. Can't you see he's exhausted? Look, let me take him ashore. Tomorrow we can decide what must be done. There's no sense talking any more. And no reason to get all excited over hallucinations."

"Hallucinations!" I sat up, shaking.

She put her hand on my shoulder. "Never mind. We'll discuss it later, when you're rested. Come on, I'll go in with you. Juan can have one of the men row us ashore."

I was silent. It took all my strength to get over the side and into the rowboat. When we landed, about a mile down from the Cove, Dena and the crew-man helped me walk up the steep, winding path which led to the old house I occupied on the hill. Looking down, I could see the yacht riding out there on the waters, silhouetted against the sunset.

The crew-man went back, but Dena stayed. My serving couple, Felipe and Alicia, prepared a meal for us. Then I sent them away. The food and a few drinks restored me. By the time darkness came I was ready to talk. And Dena was ready to listen.

We sat on the terrace outside the house. The sky was bright, and I had the feeling

that, if I wished, I could reach out and grasp the moon and the stars. But I was content merely to sit there and watch the play of moonlight and starlight in Dena's gold-en hair.

Dena filled our glasses and sank back.

"All right," she said. "What really happened down there?"

I stared out at the water. "But I already told you."

"We're alone now. You aren't talking for Juan's benefit, or the crew's."

"I realize that."

She sipped her drink. "Can't you remember? Was it really all hallucination?"

I leaned forward. "Dena, none of it was hallucination. It happened just the way I told you. We found the treasure. And that creature down there. I dreamed about it, but it's real, it actually exists. Maybe it's not the only one, either—what about all these legends of sea-serpents and monsters? What happened to the crew of the *Marie Celeste*? I've read about such things on land, too; jungle villages, whole primitive civilizations which had been apparently destroyed instantaneously without warning. Suppose there *are* life-forms we know nothing about, spawned when

the earth was young and still surviving—or spawned even *before* the earth evolved? What about the beings that might have come here from the stars, the alien entities that never die? Those legends—"

"Legends!" Dena brushed the hair back from her forehead, frowning. "I'm interested in the truth."

"But I'm trying to explain—"

"You don't have to explain." She stared at me levelly. "I know what happened. You and Don went down to the wreck. You found the altar, perhaps you even found the chest. And they were gold, all right."

"Yes. I wasn't lying. Those objects would be worth a fortune if we raised them."

"Of course. You thought about that, didn't you? And you thought how wonderful it would be to have that fortune, keep it for yourself. So you got hold of Don's spear, and you killed him. And then you came back up with your crazy story about the monster, knowing it would frighten Juan and the others, keep them from going down to look. Now you'll wait until they go, get your own crew, and salvage the treasure.

That's the way it was, wasn't it? You killed Don."

"No."

She came closer, her voice low. "I understand. It wasn't just for the sake of the money, was it? You wanted me. You knew you'd have to get Don out of the way, first. And you remembered what I said, about not having the guts. So it's my fault, too. I'm not afraid to face the truth—I'm partly responsible."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. I'm saying that I'm sorry, but it's happened now and I can live with it. We can both live with it. We will get the treasure together. You and I. And then, if you still want me—"

Then she was in my arms and I looked down at my tarnished angel, at the golden toy, mine now for the taking. And I smiled, and I pushed her away.

"It's too late. I don't want you. Now, or ever."

"I'm not good enough for you any more, is that it?" She stood up quickly. "Now that you know about the gold, you think you can keep it all for yourself and you won't need me because you can buy other women."

"I don't need you. And I

don't need other women any more, either."

"Oh, yes you do! You need me all right! Because all I have to do is go to that precious mayor of yours here on the island and tell him who murdered Don."

"Go ahead," I said. "We'll see what happens when he tries to pit himself against a God. For it is a God, you know. Stronger and stranger than any entity of Earth."

Dena stepped back, still staring.

"You're crazy," she whispered. "That's it. You've gone crazy."

"Because I don't want you as a woman any more? Because I'm through with sentimental daydreams about teddy-bears and angels? Oh, no, Dena. I'm not crazy. I *was* crazy, perhaps, until I gazed on the ultimate realities. What I saw was not pretty, but its truth transcends terror. I've gazed on something far more powerful than the petty forces that rule our little lives and our little lusts. There is a power stronger than all earthly desire, a hunger greater than all earthly hunger. And when I saw it today, when I recognized it down there, I did the only thing a mortal may do. I bowed down and worshipped,

do you hear, Dena? I remember now what happened after Don died. I sank to my knees on the ocean floor and I worshipped!" I rose and faced her. "And then I went over to the chest and I opened the lid. I was not afraid any longer, because I knew *it* was aware of my emotions. I could realize that. And I could release it without harm, because it understood I meant to serve it. Dena, I opened the lid!"

"I don't believe you, I don't believe anything you're saying—"

"*They* believe me." I gazed out at the moonlit waters of the Cove beyond.

She followed my stare.

"Don't you see what's happening?" I said, softly. "The yacht is moving. Juan raised the anchor. He believed what I told him. And he and the crew must have made up their minds. They aren't going to wait until tomorrow. They aren't waiting for us at all. They remember what happened to Roberto and to Don and they want to get away."

Dena gasped. "You're right—the yacht is moving! What can we do?"

"We can watch," I told her, calmly. "They want to get away. But they won't. They

don't know what you know now—that I opened the lid. And its hunger is growing. Look!"

The moon was very bright over the water. And even at the distance of a mile we could see the bubbles rising, see the waves churning and boiling as something broke the surface just before the vessel. It was like a wave, like a waterspout, like a giant cuttlefish. And the tentacles tossed and twisted and twined about the prow, and the little yacht tilted, and then a black bulk emerged from the waters and swept across the deck. In the distance we could hear faint screams, and then Dena was screaming too as the boat careened over on its side and the huge black blob enveloped its white hull and bore it down, down—

The black bubbles disappeared, and there was only the soft and shimmering surface of the sea, glittering in the cold silver moonlight.

"*The Marie Celeste*," I murmured. "And countless other ships. Countless other mortals in all climes, in all times. When the appetite waxes, it awakens. When it wanes, it subsides. But now the hunger grows again and it will come forth to feed. Not on the bodies alone, but on the *being*."

It will glut on soul-substance, feast on the emotions and the psyche. First a ship, then a village, then a town, perhaps an entire island. And what is comparable to that knowledge? Does that slimy gold under the water or the tarnished gold of your body hold any allure for one who realizes his true destiny at last? His destiny to serve a God?"

"Get away from me—I'll go to Robales—"

I pinned her arms. "You will not go to Jose Robales. You will come with me. And I will summon it to the sacrifice."

She screamed again, and I hit her with the heel of my hand across the back of the neck. It silenced her, but did not bruise her mouth or face. I knew it would be better if she was not marked. One does not bring spoiled fruit or withered flowers as an offering to the Gods.

I carried her down to the beach, then, in the moonlight. And I stripped her and staked her out upon the sand there at the water's edge. She was silver and gold in the moonlight, and for a moment I coveted the treasure of her body's richness. But I had spoken truly; this was as nothing to the knowledge of my destiny.

I had found myself at last—I was meant to serve. To serve, and to summon.

I sent my thoughts out across the water and deep down. It was not difficult, not since I had opened the chest and let the blackness therein meet and mingle with my being. For already I was a part of it and it was a part of me. And I knew this was what it was searching for—not the crew, but the golden woman.

Now it would come to slake all hunger and all thirst. And my own appetite would be appeased in the sacrificial act.

I did not have long to wait. The bubbles burst near the shore and then it flowed forth. Larger now—for as it feasts, it grows. The black blur became a black cloud, the black cloud became a black blot, the black blot became a black body; a thousand writhing arms to caress her nakedness, a thousand pulsing lips to drink, a thousand hungry mouths to savor and to swallow.

And the blackness flowed over her whiteness and it was like an exploding ecstasy in which I was the ravisher and the ravished, the eater and the eaten, the victor and the victim, the watcher and the watched, and it was better than seeing Don, it was better

than seeing the crew, and I knew it would keep getting more wonderful each time, the sensation stronger still as *we* kept feeding and growing, feeding and growing.

Yes, *we*.

Because when it was finished, and the blackness melted back into the rolling waters, leaving the beach bare before it in the moonlight, I knew that *we* would go on together.

There had been no altar this time, but that did not matter. *We* know nothing, care nothing for altars of gold. The bed is not the bride, the plate is not the meal. Anywhere and anytime, all that is necessary is soul and substance for the sacrifice. So that *we* can swallow and grow, swallow and grow.

I made *our* plans.

Jose Robales had warned me to keep the crew away from the natives in the little village behind the Cove. They were only ignorant savages, after all—probably not much better than the jungle natives who had reared the golden altar to a God. But they lived—and that is enough to *we* who drink life.

So I would summon the God again, tomorrow, the next day, soon. And it would come in its strength and take

nourishment. Perhaps the villagers would bow down to it and then raise an altar of their own. Perhaps not. In the end, it couldn't matter. Because in the end *we* would take them all.

And perchance Jose Robales might come to us. If not, in due season *we* would go to him.

Yes, in due season *we* would visit everyone on the island of Santa Rita. And our awareness would grow as we incorporated all the lives and all the learning and all the lusts. And our appetite would increase. And *we* would grow; grow in size, grow in power, grow in strength to satisfy our dark desires.

There need be no end. It is a small distance from island to island: And as *we* grow we can travel faster, seize more swiftly and surely. With us there is no time and no death—nothing to halt or to hinder.

The creature that swallows the world.

Why not?

From island to island, always growing. Then on to the mainland, to the swarming cities. It will feast and I will share, it will search and I will lead, it will rule and I will serve, for ever and ever.

And I have written it down now so that all may know the truth and decide whether to join in worship or serve us in another way—as subjects, sustenance for sacrifice.

The choice is yours, but make it swiftly. For I feel the urging of that black appetite, and soon *we* must go forth to ravage and raven across the world . . .

(Statement of Jose Robales, mayor.)

In the matter of the man Howard Lane, presently confined to await trial on the charge of murder, these facts are known.

The foregoing account was found, in the prisoner's own hand, upon the desk in the study of his home, by Felipe and Alicia Martino, his servants.

The statement was handed to me when I visited his house early this morning, together with Officer Valdez, seeking to question him concerning the sinking of the yacht *Rover*, which event had been reported to me by certain natives of the village near Cutthroat Cove.

Howard Lane being asleep, I first examined the above statement and then awakened him, formally charging him with the murder of Roberto

Ingali, Donald Hanson, and the woman Dena Drake.

This he of course denied, but in such a manner as to permit of only one supposition—that this account he had written truly represents his own belief as to what occurred.

It is evident that the prisoner suffers from a severe mental derangement, and I shall make it a point to see that he undergoes a complete examination before formally bringing him to trial. At the moment one can only conclude that he performed the crimes while in a state of unbalance, and—although it is not easy to determine the method—arranged for the sinking of the yacht.

Unfortunately there are as yet no witnesses who can testify to actually seeing the vessel go down, but the sudden disappearance of a seaworthy boat anchored in calm waters, coupled with the discovery this morning of timbers and bits of wreckage washed ashore in the Cove, permits of no other conclusion. It was undoubtedly Hanson's boat.

The prisoner's statement seems obviously the work of a mind obsessed with guilt, and it is to be hoped that he will recover sufficiently to

make a full and sensible confession.

Before wiring to summon a physician, I shall make it my business, as an official and as a former friend of Howard Lane, to visit him in the jail and urge that course upon him.

Indeed, I would have done so today, had it not been that the reports of the wreckage washed ashore occupied my time and attention until late this afternoon.

As it is now well into the evening, I will put off my interview until tomorrow morning.

It is to be admitted that one is shaken by this sad turn of events.

The spectacle of Howard Lane, my former friend and now my prisoner, in the grip of his delusions—shrieking threats and curses like an hysterical woman—disturbs one far more than I can indicate. Even now I can hear him moaning in his cell below.

And it is sorrowful indeed to reflect upon the sudden

tragedy which has visited our peaceful island.

As I sit here and gaze out across the calm waters of which the prisoner has written so vividly, I cannot reconcile this scene with such a chaos of murder and violence. As for the statement itself, absurd as it may seem to one still in full possession of his reason, there is a certain powerful if irrational logic about it—

Wait. The prisoner below is not moaning. He is shouting again, in measured cadences. It is as though he were *chanting*.

And the waters of the bay—

The moonlight is clear and I can see the black bubbles rising. They are moving closer to the shore, moving swiftly. And now I hear the screaming from the waterfront. They see it, they see it coming out of the water. It is black and immense, and it is slithering forward, it is coming to feast just as he said it would, it is coming to devour the w—

THE END

The Madder They Come

By LLOYD BIGGLE, Jr.

ILLUSTRATOR MARTINEZ

*Come visit a madhouse. Meet
some of the guests. You may
come out wondering who's
mad and who's sane. In fact,
you may come out worrying
about yourself.*

DOCTOR Stanley Hollinger was in a mild hurry, that Monday afternoon. It was a fine September day, and there was a new nurse over in the Out-Patient Division. He had not met her, but he'd glimpsed her that morning, from a distance. She was shapely, she had flaming red hair, and she flashed the kind of mocking little smile that affects men in odd ways. It affected Stanley Hollinger in just the right way, and he had no intention of letting the sun go down without getting to know her better.

He went down the hallway at a brisk trot, unlocked a door, and stepped through. A heinous bedlam smote him in the face, and he carefully closed the door behind him, and locked it.

"Three wards to go," he told himself. And then the redhead. He wondered what time she got off duty. He wondered if she would be busy that night. He restrained his urge to turn and walk out, and tried to concentrate on the patients. It took some effort.

Most of the staff doctors rarely bothered with ward visits, but Hollinger felt differently about it. A patient's behavior out in a ward often gave him some insight he never could have gleaned in his office. He brushed aside the memory of the redhead's smile, and stood looking about him with detached professional interest.

His first impression was that Ward Fifteen was quieter than usual; and that vaguely disturbed him. Not that there



Carter moved away. The broom stayed where it was.

was any lack of noise about him. Screams, shouts and verbal explosions cut the air above the general hubbub. In the far corner, a swarthy little fellow had bribed or coerced three fellow patients into forming an audience, and they squatted on the floor in front of him while he howled at them hysterically. There was a singer in the center of the room who stopped every few notes and bowed almost correctly. A frail, middle-aged man was straining heroically to get a polisher started. He perspired, he moaned and grunted, and his face had a feverish flush. In front of him, a giant of a man was helping him out by bellowing encouragement while he hauled laboriously on an invisible rope. The polisher remained motionless.

Charlie Andrews, the robust, good-natured attendant, walked over to Hollinger and nodded politely. "Afternoon, Doctor Hollinger."

"Good afternoon, Charlie," Hollinger said.

He glanced about the room again—at the card game, where one player had most of the deck fanned out in his hand and two players concentrated intently upon no cards at all, at the sleeping forms

scattered about haphazardly on the floor, at the morose patients who huddled on the wooden benches and stared vacantly into some remote dimension. One patient had managed to stretch out on a bench, and two patients were sitting on top of him, and none of the three seemed to mind.

Suddenly Hollinger understood the apparent quietness. The piano was silent.

"Where's the musician?" he said.

"He can't play today. He has a broken finger—he says."

Hollinger nodded, and picked out the musician—ex-musician—among the bench-sitters. He was a young man who had been a promising pianist, and he'd worked out a brilliant harmonization of *America* which seemed to be mainly atonal. At least, it sounded atonal after an hour or two of uninterrupted repetitions.

"Same old thing, eh, Charlie?" Hollinger said.

"It sure is," Charlie said.

Hollinger shrugged. He'd only been at the Cardale State Hospital for six months; but a staff member became quickly inured to the extraordinary. If he did not, the chances were excellent that he would stop being a staff member, and better than average that he would

find himself well on the way to meeting the rather stiff entrance qualifications imposed upon the patients.

"Well . . ." Hollinger said, turning to leave. He stopped. "Where'd they get the broom?"

Charlie whirled, and swore savagely. "Now who smuggled that in here?"

He bounded forward, and Hollinger called sharply to him. "Wait!"

A chubby, white-haired man had the broom up in the air, trying to balance it on his nose. He steadied it, took away his hands, and ducked awkwardly as it crashed to the floor. Undaunted, he raised it again. The other patients ignored him.

"Sidney Carter, isn't it?" Hollinger said.

"Yeah," Charlie said. "That is Sid, all right."

The broom crashed down a second time, and a third. Hollinger kept count, his clinical curiosity aroused. How many failures would Sidney Carter tolerate before he lost interest?

The broom came down a fourth time, and whacked Carter soundly on the head as it fell. He picked it up, and studied it with an air of mystification.

"Shall I take it away from him?" Charlie asked.

"Wait," Hollinger said.

The broom went up again, was steadied, released, and—stayed. Carter staggered about wildly, body arched back, nose erect, and somehow kept the broom in the air. He regained his equilibrium, and boldly started a triumphant circuit of the room. Another patient followed along behind, mimicking his contorted posture and jerky movements.

The procession had gone twenty feet, and was picking up speed, when Carter walked out from under the broom. He did not immediately notice this oversight. He kept moving forward, back arched, nose erect. Hollinger forgot Carter and concentrated on the broom—because the broom did not seem to notice the oversight, either. It hung in mid-air, motionlessly perpendicular, and Carter's mimic strutted under it, grinned at the sight of it hovering over him, and moved on.

Ten feet away, Carter suddenly missed the broom. He straightened up with a look of profound surprise on his round face, and turned just in time to see the broom plummet downwards.

"Did you see that?" Hollinger muttered.

"No," Charlie said. "No—I don't think I did."

On his way back to his office, Hollinger encountered the red-headed nurse in the hallway. He passed her by without so much as a nod.

That evening Hollinger and Charlie Andrews sat in the comfortable quarters of Doctor Willard Manley, the hospital's Associate Director. Hollinger told their story, and Doctor Manley listened, and gazed peacefully at the fire that crackled in the fireplace, and stirred himself only to refill their glasses. His twitching eyebrows registered just the proper amount of incredulity, and he said nothing.

"You act," Hollinger said, "as if you don't believe us."

"I don't."

"Why not? We were both there. We both saw it."

"I'm glad the Doc was there," Charlie broke in. "If it was just me that saw it, I'd of never mentioned it."

"Exactly," Doctor Manley said. "One hears about so many queer things around a place like this."

Hollinger exploded. "We're not patients, damn it!"

"No!" Manley admitted, cocking his bald head as if he thought that condition could be corrected easily enough.

"You say you saw it. Now what do you want to do about it?"

"I was going to suggest that we give Carter a broom tomorrow, and you watch yourself and see what happens."

"All right," Doctor Manley said. "I will. Ordinarily I refuse to dignify an irrational experiment by my presence, but it's obvious that I'll have to get to the bottom of this thing, Hollinger, if there's going to be any work done in your section this week."

Hollinger winced, and afterwards he was rather glad that his response had been inaudible.

The following morning Doctors Manley and Hollinger waited unobtrusively in one corner of the room, while Charlie Andrews handed a broom to Sidney Carter. They watched as Carter solemnly swept his way around the room twice, energetically sending up clouds of imaginary dust. Eventually Carter dropped the broom and wandered away. Another patient picked it up, straddled it, and galloped about uttering piercing whoops. When he discarded it and slumped panting to the floor, a third patient seized it, raised it to his shoulder, and carefully shot the musician,

who was beginning his hundred and tenth rendition of *America*. The musician whirled when his fellow patient shouted, "Bang!" He walked over and jerked the broom out of his hands, laid it down on the floor, and returned to the piano.

"At least the fellow still has some critical faculty," Doctor Manley murmured.

A patient left the card table, grabbed the broom, and made like a baton twirler. The broom handle struck the floor its first time around, and the broom fluttered away. Sidney Carter picked it up, and resumed his sweeping.

Doctor Manley grunted disgustedly. "This is where I came in."

"Give him a chance," Hollinger said.

Carter slid the broom across the floor, and joined the kibitzers around the card game. He leaned over and cooly studied the hand of a player who held no cards.

"Let me try something," Charlie said. He picked up the broom and held it in the air, over his head. Carter saw him and hurried back, babbling excitedly. Charlie handed him the broom, and slowly edged away from him. Hollinger took out a stop watch, and waited.

On Carter's third try the

broom stayed up. He gave a nasal shout of triumph, and staggered away. He negotiated half-a-dozen steps safely, stumbled over a sleeping patient, and lost his balance. Hollinger clicked his stop watch, and waited breathlessly. The broom remained in the air, swinging slowly, like a pendulum.

Carter landed heavily on his rear. For a few seconds he sat looking about foolishly. Then he remembered his broom. He finally located it, and scrambled to his feet just as it slid slowly floorward.

Hollinger clicked his stop watch again.

"How long?" Doctor Manley asked.

"Eighteen seconds."

"It seemed like a week. Let's get out of here."

Charlie let them out, and locked the door after them. They strolled down the dingy hallway, unlocked another door, and stepped out into the bright fall sunshine. Doctor Manley led the way across the hospital grounds to a bench. They sat down, lit cigarettes, and looked out on a quiet residential street.

"Telekinesis," Doctor Manley said.

"It has to be," Hollinger admitted.

"So much has been written about the so-called *psi* powers, both fact and fiction. Especially fiction. At one time in the past the subject—ah—interested me. I remember tales of good people using *psi* powers benevolently, and bad people using *psi* powers fiendishly. But I don't recall anything about an insane person having them. What does he use them for? What possible benefit could such powers be to him, or to anyone else? Good and bad are only relative terms, you know, but this person could be dangerous. So what do we do about it? Nail everything down, and forget it?"

"I honestly don't know," Hollinger said.

"I think we have an obligation," Manley said thoughtfully. "An obligation to study and experiment. If we can find out who it is, of course."

Hollinger turned quickly. "Who it is? But Carter . . ."

"Not Carter. Think back on the way he reacted. Someone helped him balance the broom, and held it up when he fell. How many men do you have in that ward?"

"Thirty-four."

"Thirty-three, then, not counting Carter. And not one of them is rational enough to cooperate. Now how do we find out who it is?"

"I still think it's Carter. He was concentrating mentally on keeping the broom up, and that kind of mental effort must be the basis for telekinesis. Of course, he wouldn't know that his mental effort was responsible. But I'll give you odds he was the only one concentrating on it. No one else paid any attention to him."

"It's impossible to say just where a patient's attention might be," Doctor Manley said testily. "Anyway, we can't settle the problem by arguing about it. Now let's think of some tests, and get back in there and apply them."

They isolated Sidney Carter and his broom, and Carter refused to perform. He sat sullenly on the floor, his round face drooping mournfully, and muttered unintelligibilities to himself. He brightened when half a dozen of his fellow patients were placed with him. A short time later he was balancing the broom, and Hollinger clocked it suspended in mid-air for fourteen seconds.

"That's a piece of luck," Doctor Manley said. "Got him the first try. Now we'll remove one patient at a time, until the broom stops balancing."

"Wait a minute," Hollinger objected. "This doesn't prove

it isn't Carter. It may just prove that Carter won't perform without company."

"I still think—but then, you may be right."

"We need a control. Another group of six or seven."

"I suppose it wouldn't do any harm," Doctor Manley admitted.

They brought in a second group, and a third, and a fourth and fifth. And Sidney Carter continued his balancing act, and at some point in each performance the broom defied gravity. Hollinger clocked a record thirty-two-second suspension.

Manley and Hollinger returned the patients to Ward Fifteen, and walked back across the hospital grounds to their bench.

"Don't look so damned smug," Manley snapped.

"Sir?" Hollinger said innocently.

"All right. So it *has* to be Carter. Either that, or there's at least five of them. And that is impossible. If one human being out of a million has telekinetic ability—and I doubt that—we would hardly find five in one ward of a mental hospital."

"I was considering it from another angle," Hollinger said. "Why should we find even one in a mental hospital?"

Manley looked at him sharply. "Are you hinting at a theory? Mental unbalance a necessary prerequisite for *psi* powers?"

"Not a necessary prerequisite. A probable resultant. Look at it this way. A person who is a sensitive telepath from birth would hardly have a thought to call his own. He'd be bombarded continuously by other mentalities, and it would be impossible for him to develop normally. Even if he did maintain a slight edge of mental balance, one afternoon in Yankee Stadium would drive him violently insane."

"Your conclusion?"

"If you want to find a first-rate telepath, look in a mental hospital. Of course, you'll have a hell of a time differentiating between him and the other patients."

"Telepaths are supposed to be able to shield themselves from other minds."

"That's a theory, too. Besides—would a baby be able to shield itself? Even if it had ability to shield itself, it would be a mental case before it ever learned how to use that ability."

"None of which helps us with our telekinetic patient."

"Perhaps not," Hollinger admitted. "But then—he may

be a telepath, too. We haven't any idea what other power he may have. And even if he isn't, unexpressed telekinetic powers could result in insanity. A person with great musical talent might become a mental case digging ditches. A person with great telekinetic talent might become a mental case if he didn't understand his telekinetic urges and didn't know what to do about them."

"Let's not lose our perspective on this," Manley said dryly. "We have one mental patient, and we are only positive about one *psi* power. Let's check on Sidney Carter's background, and decide what to do with him."

They hurried off to the Records Section, and checked. Prior to his mental breakdown, Sidney Carter had led a normal, humdrum existence. There had been no apparent foreshadowing of his mental illness. He'd been a grocery-store clerk, a factory worker, and a bus driver. He'd had an apparently happy marriage, and raised three children. He'd been committed at the age of fifty-one, and he'd been a patient for twelve years, with no apparent improvement.

"If your theory's correct," Manley said, "he contained those urges pretty well for fifty-one years."

"What do we do now?"

"Supposing we were able to effect a cure by encouraging him to use his telekinetic ability? That would make medical history. This case will make medical history no matter what happens. Our next step is to teach the patients of Ward Fifteen a new game."

It took all of half an hour, but Manley succeeded in getting the thirty-four patients seated on the floor in a large circle, legs stretched out in front of them. Charlie Andrews stood in the center of the circle, with a large beach ball. He pivoted slowly, selected a patient at random, and rolled the ball. It bounced into the patient's lap, and he clutched it stupidly. Charlie stepped forward; and traded him a piece of candy for the ball.

"They have a child-like selfishness," Manley said. "As soon as it gets across to Carter that possession of the ball is worth a piece of candy, we'll see a telekinetic in action."

Charlie rolled the ball again. And again. The patients began to register interest, even excitement, as they leaned forward to watch. One patient leaped to his feet to grab the ball, and was ruled out of order. The game continued until

each of the thirty-four had received the ball, and won his piece of candy.

"We'll try again tomorrow," Manley said.

They tried again on the next day, and the day after that. They kept trying. And on the sixth day the inexplicable happened. The rolling ball suddenly hooked to the left, leaving an eager patient empty-handed while his neighbor claimed the prize. Hollinger and Manley stared, and turned to stare at each other. The winner was not Sidney Carter.

"I'll take over," Manley told Charlie.

He rolled the ball slowly in the same direction. It made the same sharp curve, stopped abruptly, and rolled back across the circle, picking up speed. There was a new winner, also not Sidney Carter. It didn't make sense—or did it?

With trembling fingers, Hollinger got out his notebook and recorded two names.

The patients were bouncing excitedly, rapt enthusiasm on their faces. The ball began to do crazy things. Untouched, it shot back and forth across the circle, swerving to avoid Doctor Manley in the center. The patients' attitude changed to one of strenuous concentration. The ball had a dozen changes of direction before a

patient finally seized it and claimed his prize.

Doctor Manley placed the ball in the center of the circle, and walked away. The ball began to roll. From one corner of the room Hollinger followed its wild shifts of direction, and frantically recorded names. The patients were shouting hysterically. The ball came to a complete stop in the center of the circle and remained there, spinning. For a moment nobody moved.

A patient suddenly scrambled for the ball. Another grabbed his foot and sent him sprawling. And suddenly all the patients were on their feet, screaming, struggling. The ball shot into the air, and stayed there. A bench lifted slowly upwards and hung at a precarious angle. The piano moved a foot out from the wall. Untouched, it slowly began to play a descending scale, from the top of the keyboard. Another scale started at the bottom of the keyboard and moved up rapidly, and both were lost in crashing dissonances. The piano moved another foot.

Manley and Charlie Andrews were waving their arms and shouting orders. Hollinger dropped his notebook into his pocket, and moved out to join

them. A little Italian suddenly lifted into the air and plopped onto the hovering bench, his face blank with surprise. The bench dropped away from him, and he rose slowly to the ceiling, descended slowly. The piano leaped into the air, and dropped with a splintering thud. Candy erupted from Manley's pocket, and the patients made a reckless, flailing scramble for it.

"We'll need help!" Manley shouted.

Hollinger nodded, and started for the door. A bench hurled past him, turning slowly, end over end, and crashed into the wall. Hollinger suddenly found himself moving backwards, his feet dragging on the linoleum. A polisher whizzed past him on a lightning circuit of the room. Manley and Charlie Andrews stood helplessly among the wildly gesticulating patients, unable to move. The locked door suddenly flew open, and banged against the wall.

The patients made a dash for it, and crowded through. All around the room objects crashed to the floor. Hollinger, Manley and the attendant were suddenly released. Charlie tore into the hallway after the patients, and was propelled back into the room.

The door slammed shut. When they tried to open it, they found it locked.

With fumbling fingers Hollinger unlocked the door. The attendant raced down the hallway after the patients. Manley and Hollinger dashed out a side door and across to the administration building. Hollinger stood looking out the window of Manley's office while the Associate Director yelped frantically into a telephone.

The patients of Ward Fifteen were trooping across the lawn, towards the main gate. A guard moved out to intercept them, and ended up perched on a branch of a tree, thirty feet in the air. The gate swung open, and the patients poured out into the street. A parked car leaped sideways, and there was a shrill screech of brakes as a bus crashed into it. The traffic signal in front of the main gate began to swing wildly, snapped loose, and soared in a long arc to crash to the pavement fifty feet away.

The laughing crowd of patients moved across the street to the small business section, and paused in front of a drug store. Candy, cigarettes and assorted merchandise fluttered through the doorway. A pedestrian suddenly found him-

self hanging two feet off the ground while his feet churned frantically and the contents of his pockets rained onto the sidewalk. The patients scrambled for the coins, and the pedestrian managed to retrieve his wallet and a few other essentials before he fled.

Manley finished his telephoning, and joined Hollinger at the window.

"Eighteen," Hollinger said. "I counted eighteen. And there are probably more."

Manley groaned. "Latent telekinetics. All they needed was the proper stimulus, and like damned fools we gave it to them. Now what do we do? We're going to have one hell of a time catching them, and even if we do, we can't put them in a locked room. And I don't suppose a jacket would hold one of them long. We could nail the door shut. Do you suppose they can work nails out of wood? No kind of lock or bolt would keep them in. Maybe we'll have to weld cells for them."

Sirens sounded in the distance. Hospital attendants were racing across the vast grounds towards the main gate. A police car roared up to the curb and an officer leaped out, revolver in hand. He stared stupidly as the revolver soared into the air and stayed

there, discharging itself skyward at irregular intervals.

"Once we get this mess straightened out," Manley said, "we're going to do some thorough research. I want to know how those particular men all got into Ward Fifteen. I can't believe it's a coincidence. And I can't believe that telekinesis is something contagious, or . . ."

"Or that *any* insane person has latent *psi* powers?" Hollinger said.

Manley shuddered. More police cars arrived. A fire truck skidded to a halt. The firemen started for a hydrant with their hose, and the hose was seized with convulsions, jerked out of their hands, and slowly ascended vertically into the air. A policeman landed with a thud on the top of his squad car and stretched out there, unable to move. Another unwisely threw a tear gas bomb, and it curved gracefully and went off at his feet.

The office door jerked open, and a nurse hurried in. "Doctor Manley!" she panted.

"What now?" Manley said wearily.

"The oddest thing just happened over in the Women's Division. Ward Thirty-two. A woman was balancing a box on her head, and . . ."

THE END



The Man Who Took It With Him

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

Old J. M. was vital to the agency. When he died they found they couldn't get along without him. So they went to a specialist. Here's writer Henry Slesar at his zaniest—and best.

WHEN Jack Molton, president of Molton, Vetch & Barnaby died, his obituary in the *Times* was four columns on five hundred lines. Walter Vetch, the executive V.P. of the advertising agency, solemnly measured the space on the day it appeared, and was gratified to find it considerably

larger than even the eulogies afforded to a university president, a Nobel Prize physicist, and several other luminaries who had the misfortune to pass away on the same day as Jack Molton.

But it was small compensation. Jack Molton had been the guiding genius of the agency,



J. M. materialized and immediately began laying down the law.

and his ability to make decisions, attract new clients, and placate unhappy incumbents, would be sorely missed at MV&B.

The funeral was the largest and most impressive the east coast had seen in many years. There was much private eulogizing afterwards, but none more heartfelt than the small wake held at the Savoy-Carlton cocktail lounge, where Walter Vetch and Gil Barnaby said good-bye to old J.M. with damp eyes and dry martinis.

"I thought the son-of-a-gun was asleep," Walter Vetch said, shaking his head. "We were having a Plans Board on the Old Panther account, and the copy chief was presenting the new campaign. Jack just sat there with his eyes closed."

"I know," Gil Barnaby, the third agency partner said sadly. "J.M. never cared about looking at *ads*. He always said ads were a dirty detail. He was interested in the Big Picture."

"I thought he was asleep," Walter said again, sucking on an olive. He was a slight, sandy-haired man, with great pouches beneath his mournful eyes.

"We'll miss the old buzzard," Gil sighed.

"We sure will."

They munched cheese wa-

fers for a while. Gil put his elbows on the bar and stroked his scalp in thought. His head was as bald as a bullet, and his round face had looked almost indecently naked until he had wisely grown a small, spiky moustache.

"I'll tell you the truth," he said at last, "I'm plenty worried, Wally. This is gonna make a big difference at the agency."

"I know," the executive V.P. agreed. I can feel it coming already. The Old Panther people have been acting funny today. They cancelled our meeting next week—said they didn't want to discuss the new campaign with J.M.'s funeral wreath still fresh. But I have a feeling it's more than that."

"Same thing happened on the Cook-All account. That squirt ad manager called me this morning. They cancelled out of three magazines. No reason."

"Well, you know how close J.M. was to that account. That goes for Inkwiper Pens, too."

They sat in morbid speculation for another martini.

"Well, old J.M.'s got a Bigger Client now," Walter said, being given to fleeting poetic ideas.

"Yep," Gil answered. "He's handling a Bigger Account."

"He's on a bigger Plans

Board today," Wally countered.

"Yep," Gil said, pushing the check towards his partner.

Within two weeks, the surviving owners of Molton, Vetch and Barnaby discovered that their fears had not been unfounded.

Walter Vetch, as a matter of course, succeeded Jack Molton as president of the agency, with Gil his second-in-command. Earnest statements of "business as usual" were issued to the advertising press and the MV&B employees.

But business was not so usual, and when Walter left the office on Friday afternoon, he was so depressed that he went straight home.

His wife, Alma, looked startled when he entered.

"What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Why should anything be wrong?"

"It's only six. You're never home until eight. Are you feeling all right?"

"I feel lousy."

He dropped onto the sofa with a groan. His wife looked at him across the room. She was a big, maternal woman, who never failed to respond to her husband's heaves and sighs. She came to the sofa and took his thin hand in hers.

"Now tell me all about it," she invited soothingly. "Is something going wrong at the agency?"

"Everything's wrong," Walter said. "Maybe there won't be any agency in another few weeks."

"Why? What's happening?"

"Well, Old Panther, for one thing. You know how much they relied on J.M. The only way we got them to approve this new campaign was by telling them that J.M. gave it his blessing in the last Plans Board he attended."

"Did he?"

"No," Walter moaned. "He was dead, or at least asleep, before he saw the ads. But we had to lie to save the situation."

"Well, why worry about it? If they bought the campaign—"

"But for how long? I don't think they *trusted* anybody at the agency. Only Jack Molton. And then there's Cook-All. They cancelled out their advertising; said they wanted to think things over. And Ink-wiper Pen won't even see us . . ."

"There, there," his wife said.

"I tell you it's serious! All over Madison Avenue, you can hear the same talk. MV&B's folding. MV&B's tottering.

MV&B can't survive without Jack Molton—"

The telephone rang. Alma picked it up.

"It's for you," she said. "Gil Barnaby."

Walter took it, feeling doom in the vibrations of the receiver.

"Yes, Gil?"

He listened in gloomy silence for three minutes.

"All right, Gil. We'll talk about it Monday."

He hung up the phone and put his head back wearily.

"Gil had drinks with a friend from another agency. Says Cook-All's been talking to them. We're through, Alma!"

"There, there," his wife said.

They remained that way for some ten minutes, and Alma was thinking hard.

"Wally," she said, "I know you're going to get mad at this, so I won't say it."

"Say what?"

"Well, I know how you feel about Madame Vishnapolsky, so I hate to mention her name. But if you'd only consider it—"

"What are you talking about?" He sat upright and stared at her plump, good-natured face. "Who's Madame Vishnapolsky?"

"You know. You called me a

silly old fool for going to her. But now that you're in trouble—"

"Alma, will you talk sense? I don't remember any—wait a minute. You don't mean that phoney medium of yours?"

Alma pouted. "Well, if that is your attitude."

"No, go on, I want to hear it. What the hell has Madame what's-her-name got to do with the agency?"

"I *told* you about her, Walter. She's the most wonderful woman. Really *sensitive*. The very first time I visited her, she brought back Uncle Julian. He looked simply awful, but it was Uncle Julian, all right. You know he drank."

"So what?"

"Well, remember Aunt Margaret's tea service, the one we thought was so much junk? Well, Uncle Julian told me to—"

"For pete's sake!" Walter exploded. "The woods are burning, and you're talking about tea services! What the hell do I care about Aunt Margaret? Or Uncle Julian? Or—"

"Walter!" Alma put her hand to her mouth and her eyes went moist. "All right. If you don't want to be helped, that's your business. But if Madame Vishnapolsky could have brought Mr. Molton back

and you'd asked *him* what to do, then—"

Wally was staring. He was staring hard. He opened his mouth to stammer his contemptuous opinion of his wife's idea, but nothing emerged. For Alma's words were an echo of the thought which had been haunting him since the day after Jack Molton's funeral, a thought which repeated "if only J.M. were here . . ."

He clenched his teeth. Between them, he said: "You're crazy, Alma. Your mother's crazy, your father's crazy, your sister's crazy, and *you're* crazy. But I'll tell you what. You make an appointment with this medium of yours. You ask her to bring Jack Molton back. If she does, let me know."

"Oh, Walter. I wouldn't know what to *say* to Mr. Molton. He was always so—brusque. Why don't *you* talk to him?" She smiled girlishly.

"Because I won't! Because it's all nonsense!"

"Well, what can you lose by trying?"

It was such a sweetly reasonable question, that the new president of MV&B was unable to answer it. He said quickly:

"All right. We'll let her try."

Madame Vishnapolsky's establishment was located on the second floor of a modest brownstone off Third Avenue. The atmosphere was rather like an exclusive restaurant, and the Madame herself not unlike a Schrafft's hostess. She was a tall, toothy woman in black, with either a far-away look or extreme myopia. She promised Alma's husband an interesting evening. Walter looked around the heavy-draped room, with its dusty oriental carpet and bridge chairs, and seemed doubtful.

"The influences," Madame Vishnapolsky smiled, "are excellent tonight." She might have been recommending the breaded veal cutlet. Walter folded his arms, and stared belligerently at the blue-velvet curtain before which they had been placéd.

"We must have utter concentration and an aura of faith, the Madame said. "We must fill the ozone with belief and sympathetic vibrations. Was Mr. Molton a relative?"

"No," Walter grunted. "He was my business partner."

"Then," Madame Vishnapolsky said, seating herself to the side of the curtain, "I will ask Broken Wing to be very business-like tonight." She

shut her eyes and folded her arms.

"Who's Broken Wing?" Walter said.

"Her other-world contact," Alma whispered. "She's an Indian squaw."

"Lights," Madame Vishnapolsky said.

Walter sat squirming in the darkness for five minutes, while the medium engaged herself in earnest conversation with someone unseen.

Five more minutes passed, and Walter was ready to forget the whole thing and go home.

"Approaching," Madame Vishnapolsky said suddenly. "The spirit is approaching. Speak, spirit. Speak to your friends..."

Cold air swept the room, and Walter shivered.

"Shut that damned window," he said aloud.

"Shut it yourself," a voice answered. "Think I came all the way here to shut a lousy window?"

A speck of light was running up and down the blue-velvet curtain. It was wandering crazily, growing larger and larger, until it began to form a human figure. It was a short figure, plump and bald-headed. There was a cigar in its mouth. It was hazy and

blurred at the edges, but it might have been Jack Molton.

"J.M.!" Walter gasped. "Is it really you, J.M.?"

"Whozzat?" the figure said truculently. "Who's that out there?"

"It's me!" Wally croaked. "Walter Vetch! Is that you?"

"Of course, it's me! What do you want, Vetch?"

Walter felt a hand touch his, and yelped. But it was only Alma, overwhelmed at the Madame's success.

"J.M., listen," he said. "I'm sorry to bother you, but we've got some problems at the agency. Can you help us?"

"Well," the spirit said gruffly, "I'm pretty damned busy myself. Breaking in a new place, you know. But all right, Vetch. Let's have it."

"It's this way," Walter said. "Practically every account has been acting edgy since you pulled out. Old Panther, for instance. And Cook-All. And Inkwiper Pens—"

"So?"

"So we need advice, J.M. For instance, Gil Barnaby picked up a rumor last night that Cook-All is shopping around for a new agency. You know what a squirt that ad manager is. You were the only one who could handle him, J.M.—"

"'Course, I was." The cigar

danced in the spirit's mouth. "That little skunk was easy to handle, if you knew the secret word."

"What secret word?"

The spirit laughed boisterously. "Two and a half percent!" it said. "You just say two and a half percent into his ear. Then watch him start jumping through hoops."

"Two and a half percent? But, J.M.—"

"It's worth it, isn't it? Now let me get back to work. You can't imagine what a mess my new outfit's in. No sense of organization at all. They never even *heard* of a Plans Board!"

But, J.M.—"

"So long, Vetch. And for God's sake, keep that squaw out of my meetings, will you?"

He muttered something else, the cigar glowed, and the spirit was gone.

On Monday morning, Walter strolled into Gil Barnaby's office, looking strangely cheerful. He sat down.

"Telephone," he said, holding out his hand.

Gil handed it over. Walter placed a call to the ad manager of Cook-All, and said:

"Hello, Tom? Good to hear your voice. Say, Tom, picked up a rumor that you people were looking for another agency..." He winked at Gil.

"Now, now, Tom. I know you are upset about poor old J.M., but I just wanted to tell you something before you made any move. Two and a half percent, Tom."

Gil Barnaby looked shocked, but Walter was smiling.

"Okay, Tom! We'll start placing the ads first thing this week. Righto, Tom. See you soon!"

He hung up with a theatrical air of triumph.

"What happened?" Gil said.

"What was that all about?"

Walter looked at his fingernails. "Just took care of a little problem. We won't have to worry about Cook-All anymore."

Gil still looked glum. "Maybe *that* account," he said. "But you won't feel so chipper when you hear about Inkwiper Pen. Looks like they're ready to cancel out, too. And they spend *twice* the money Cook-All does."

"That's really bad," Walter frowned. "But maybe we can handle the Inkwiper problem, too. It all depends on the influences."

"What influences?"

"The spirit influences. Gil, I've got great news for you! It's hard to believe, but I talked to J.M. Saturday—"

"Beg your pardon?"

"I saw him and talked to

him. He told me just what to do about Cook-All. He can do the same for Inkwiper Pen."

Gil Barnaby got up from behind the desk. He smiled pleasantly and went to the door.

"Come back," Walter laughed. "I'll tell it to you from the beginning."

He did. Gil listened in wonderment, his spiky moustache hanging over his open mouth like an exclamation point. When Walter was through explaining, he still looked incredulous.

"All-right," his partner said grimly. "I'll prove it to you. I'll prove it tonight. Telephone."

Madame Vishnapolsky was delighted to see Walter Vetch again. When he inquired about the influences, the Madame said they were not, perhaps, as good as Saturday's, but worth trying.

They tried, with Gil sitting nervously in front of the blue-velvet curtain. As for Walter, he was relaxed.

It took fifteen minutes to produce the light this time. Crazy, it bobbed and weaved and expanded to become the plump figure of Jack Molton, with a fresh cigar in his mouth.

Walter heard Gil's startled gasp, and chuckled.

"Hi, J.M.," he said cordially. "Sorry to interrupt you again. Hope I didn't break up another meeting?"

"No," the spirit growled. "But I was just making up a report. What the hell's wrong now?"

"Is it really you?" Gil said weakly.

"Of course, it's me!" the spirit snapped. "Whozzat?"

"It's me," Gil said. "Gil Barnaby. How are you, J.M.?"

"Busy. Damned busy. Place is in one holy mess. You have no idea! Sure wish-I had a good detail man like you here, Barnaby. Take a big load off my shoulders. If you ever want a job—"

"No, thanks," Gil swallowed hard. "Kind of like it here, J.M."

"Well, you think it over. Big opportunity, boy."

Walter cleared his throat. "Excuse it, J.M., but we have a little problem, too. It's about the Inkwiper account."

"Inkwiper? What's the problem?"

"Well, same old thing, I guess. They all miss you, J.M. We were kind of hoping you'd give us some advice—"

"Advice? Say, I got problems of my own now. Lot bigger than your measly headaches."

"But, J.M.! You know we still think of you as part of the firm. As long as there's an MV&B, you'll always be alive to us!"

The spirit seemed touched. "Well," he growled, "just this once, then. Best thing to do about Inkwiper is get hold of a girl named Holly Sorghum. She's got a little diary about Mr. Inkwiper. She'll want a lot of money for it, but if the account's in trouble, pay it. Not more than a hundred grand, though."

"Thank you!" Walter said sincerely. "Thank you, J.M.!"

"You're welcome, I guess. Only stop pesterin' me so much. I got too much work around here. And, Barnaby—"

"Yes, sir?" Gil said.

"You think over that offer. I won't talk salary now; can't seem to find out what they use for money around here. Maybe we can work out some kind of stock option plan."

"I don't think so," Gil said graciously, tugging at his shirt collar.

"Well, sure could use you, boy. Sure could use you."

The image faded, and the lights returned.

"Was it all right?" Madame Vishnapolsky said anxiously.

"Perfect!" Walter said.

"Just perfect!"

But Madame Vishnapolsky

hadn't seen the last of the two agency partners. Within a week, they were back for another conference. Two days later, they returned again. Only three days after that, they were raising the spirit of Jack Molton once more.

Affairs at the agency took a distinct turn for the better. Not only were the accounts more stable, but new clients began to drift over the transom. Within three months, the agency billing had increased by almost two million dollars.

On a Friday morning, four months after Jack Molton's passing, Walter and Gil returned for their sixth conference with the shade of the ex-president.

"Now what?" Jack Molton rumbled, looking tired and a little bit dissheveled.

"Sorry, J.M.," Walter said pleasantly. "But this is important, we *had* to get you back. You see, a space rep tipped us off on something big—"

"Yeah," Gil said enthusiastically. "It's really a—"

"Let me tell you," Walter said. "J.M., there's a rumor around town that—get this—that Monkey Cigarettes is looking for another agency. Now how about *that*?"

"So what?" the spirit said disdainfully, taking the cigar

out of his mouth and looking at the ragged end with a frown.

"So *what?* The second biggest account in America! Forty million dollars billing! Twelve TV shows! Fifty-two color pages! It would *double* the size of the agency overnight!"

The spirit yawned.

"Don't you see?" Gil said desperately. "It's the chance of a lifetime, J.M.!"

"Exactly," the spirit said. "So what the hell do I care about it? That's only peanuts here, gentlemen, peanuts! I've got *much* bigger problems to work on. If I only had a little assistance—"

"You've got to help us!" Walter pleaded. "Just this once, J.M.!"

"Help? *I'm* the one who needs help. You know how big a market I'm dealing with here? Billions! *Billions!* More damned consumers than you ever *dreamed* of, Vetch. But I'm surrounded by blockheads! Gold bricks! Idiots! I tell you, if I had a good detail man, I'd have this place wrapped up in one big ball of wax in no time!"

"But it's still your agency," Gil Barnaby said. "Don't you want us to grow?"

"Why should I? And as for you, Barnaby, don't forget

what I told you. I'll give you ten times the deal you have now. Why, together you and I can—"

"Never mind!" Walter said angrily. "All right, J.M. If that's your attitude, we'll have to get along without you. If that's what you want."

He started to get up, but the spirit was looking for him with new interest in his ectoplasmic eyes.

"Wait a minute," he said quietly. "Just one minute, Vetch."

"Yes?"

"Maybe I *am* being too hard on you boys. Tell you what. I'll help you get the Monkey account. Only I think you better take care of your other problems, first."

"What problems? Everything's fine."

"That's what you think," the spirit said. "Maybe you think you're all through with Cook-All, but you're not. From what I know about that ad manager, your problems are just starting. My contacts here tell me that he's stirring up a hornet's nest—"

"He is?" Walter gulped.

"Sure is. Better plug that leak right away."

"But what can we do?"

"Go right to the top. Call up old man Hotchburn, the Cook-

All president. Tell him the same thing."

"Two and a half percent?"

"Right. And that's not all. You better get back to that girl, Holly Sorghum. You know, Mr. Inkwiper's friend. From what I hear, she's about to make a deal with another agency—"

"But I bought the diary! Cost us a hundred thousand!"

"I know. But she's still got a photostatic copy. You better give her another hundred grand, and fast."

"But we can't afford it. We're using up our capital!"

The spirit chuckled. "Up to you, boys. But otherwise, your goose is cooked. And speaking of goose, you're getting it from Old Panther. They're about to kill that new campaign. Better come up with something new in a hurry. My advice is to do an animal campaign, little bunnies and stuff. The Old Panther boys *love* that kind of junk."

"Gosh, J.M.," Walter said. "I don't know how we can thank you. We'll start plugging those leaks right away!"

"You do that," the spirit said pleasantly. "Then come back and we'll talk about Monkey Cigarettes. I've got some really swell ideas about *that*, too."

When the contact was

broken, Walter gave Madame Vishnapolsky an extra fifty dollars. It had been worth it.

Walter and Gil wasted no time back at the agency. One by one, J.M.'s project were implemented. By evening, they were so giddy with a sense of triumph and anticipated riches, that they spent almost four hours at the Savoy-Carlton, toasting each other, and not forgetting the extra martini in memorium to dear old Jack Molton.

On Monday morning, they both returned from a splendid weekend to learn the results of their efforts.

The first thing that happened came in the form of a letter of cancellation from Cook-All.

"I don't understand it!" Walter groaned. "Didn't you call Hotchburn?"

"I did," Gil said. "So help me, Wally. I offered him two and a half percent of the agency gross, just like J.M. said."

"Well, what did he say?"

"Nothing! He just said thank you very much. That's all. Thank you very much!"

An hour later, the account executive serving Old Panther returned from his trip to the client with the proposed new "animals" campaign. It had been a stunning layout that

had been prepared over the weekend, depleting gamboling bunnies around the Old Panther bottle. The account man's report was stunning, too.

"They just looked at it," he said. "They looked for a long time. Then all of a sudden, the president starts screaming. I mean *screaming*. Seems he's got a bunny phobia. Goes off his head when he sees bunnies—"

"Oh, no!" Walter said. "So what happened?"

Nothing. They just told me to leave. That's all."

"That's all?" Gil said.

"No, one more thing. They said don't come back."

By late afternoon, the treasurer of MV&B added his happy note to the day. The hundred thousand dollar check to Holly Sorghum had overdrawn the agency account by forty thousand.

By nightfall, every bar, restaurant, office, taxi, and commuter train in the Madison Avenue vicinity had the story.

MV&B was through.

The next day, the cancellation letter arrived from Old Panther. Mr. Inkwiper, learning of Holly's second diary, risked everything and told his wife. She forgave him in a reconciliation scene worthy of Tolstoi, and he promptly fired

the agency. By the late afternoon, the agency's four remaining accounts became alarmed at the crumbling structure of the company, and resigned.

When Walter Vetch arrived home, he walked into the encompassing arms of Alma, his wife, and sobbed.

"How could he do this to us?" he wailed.

"Who?" Alma said gently.

"Who, Walter?"

"Jack Molton!" he shrieked through his tears. "That dirty traitor! He should drop dead *twice*!"

She did what she could to comfort him.

"I can sew," she said simply. "I sew real well, Walter."

An hour later, the telephone rang. Alma lifted the receiver and looked down at her husband dozing peacefully, his head in her lap, dreaming a dream of prosperity.

"What's that?" she said.

"Oh, my heavens!"

She listened some more, and then hung up carefully.

"What is it?" Walter said sleepily.

Alma touched the hem of her apron to her eyes. "It was Mt. Kisco Hospital. About Gil, Walter."

"Gil? What's happened to Gil?"

"Oh, Walter!" she cried.

"He jumped out of a window! Gil committed suicide! Oh, what a tragedy!"

Madame Vishnapolsky looked surprised to see him.

"But Mr. Vetch," she said. "It's almost midnight!"

"I don't care," Walter said grimly. "Believe me, Madame, this is urgent. Terribly urgent!"

"Well, I doubt if I can make any contact this late. Broken Wing goes to bed awfully early . . ."

"Try, won't you? It's important!"

They dimmed the lights, and let the influences take sway over the room. It took almost half an hour to produce the familiar light on the blue-velvet curtain, and Walter sighed with relief when it finally formed the plump shape of Jack Molton.

"Well, what's on *your* mind, Vetch?"

"You know what's on my mind! Gil Barnaby!"

"Barnaby? What about him?"

"You mean you didn't know? He jumped out of a window tonight! He committed suicide!"

"Oh, yes. Heard about that. Be good to see Barnaby again; best detail man in the business. Of course, he's still in

quarantine, but when he gets out—"

"Is that all you can say?" Walter's voice was bitter. "It was *your* fault, you know. You tricked us! You deliberately tricked us! You ruined the whole agency!"

"That so?" the spirit said calmly, looking at the long ash of his cigar. "Well, I only saved you the trouble, Vetch. Sooner or later, you would have loused it up yourself. And I needed a good detail man *now*."

Walter's eyes went round. "You mean you did it deliberately? Just to get Gil?"

"Well, I was only hoping, you understand. Never know what people will do in a crisis. Glad Barnaby saw it my way."

"Of all the dirty tricks! How could you do it, J.M.?"

Simple, if you use your noodle." He peered craftily at Walter. "Say, Vetch, now that you're out of work—"

"What?"

"Could use *another* good man on the Plans Board. Nothing too difficult, executive capacity. Want to think it over?"

"Listen," Walter said angrily. "Just because *you've* been kicked upstairs, that does not give you the right to—"

"What's that? What do you mean *upstairs*?"

Walter stared at the shimmering image on the curtain.

"Upstairs," he repeated, blinking. "You know. Up there."

"You got your directions crossed," the spirit growled. "Say, if I was Upstairs, you think I'd have all these problems? All this lousy red tape? All these frustrations?"

"You don't mean—"

"Of course, I mean! But I'll lick these birds yet. I'll get this job organized if it takes a thousand years! Now that I've got Gil, things'll be easier. And when I get you, Vetch—"

"No!" Walter said. "I'll never work for you, J.M.! Never!"

"Never?" the spirit chuckled. "Oh, I wouldn't say that. Sooner or later, you'll be on my Plans Board. So why not now?"

"Madame Vishnapolsky!" Walter screamed. "Lights! Lights!"

The lights came on quickly, and the Madame was swooning. She came to and said, "Don't *do* that; gives me an awful hangover. . . ."

It had begun to rain, and when Walter Vetch arrived home, he had the wet, forlorn look of an outcast pup. Alma jumped from the sofa when she saw his pale, drawn face,

and the blue fabric that had been lying in her lap fell to the carpet.

"Are you all right, Wally? You look terrible. Let me get you a drink."

"No!" He held up his hand like a traffic cop. "Never again, Alma. I'll never touch it again!"

"You *must* be sick."

"I'm not sick. I just don't feel like drinking. I'm not gonna do a *lot* of things anymore." He grasped her plump hands and pulled her to the sofa. "Things are going to change, Alma. They *have* to change." He spotted the blue fabric on the floor. "What's that?"

"It's a dress. I'm making myself a dress. I told you, Wally. I can sew real well." She held it up proudly. "Do you like it?"

"Looks fine," he said. "Looks just fine, Alma."

"I'm glad I started sewing again," she said primly, arranging herself on the sofa and taking the needle and thread in hand. "You know what my grandmother always said. 'The Devil finds work. . . .'"

"You're so right," Walter shivered, staring into the dancing flames of the fireplace.

THE END
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NEOSHO'S CHOICEST

By JAMES E. GUNN

ILLUSTRATOR MARTINEZ

The ugly men of Neosho, Kansas, thought they were pretty lucky when all those beautiful women turned up, bent on matrimony. Then they found it was part of a plan and they'd been duped. But even a dupe fights for what he's got.

IN NEOSHO, anyway, it started with Candy Brown. It had been going on for years in bigger places, I guess, but nobody thought anything about it.

I was only ten when Candy came in on the bus from Kansas City, but even I knew that a girl shaped like Candy, with a face like Candy, and a name like Candy had no business in a town like Neosho, Kansas. She belonged in New York modeling strapless evening dresses or black lace underwear or soap bubbles. Her real business — no matter what she was selling — was love.

That was the word that rhymed with Candy.

I've heard that fashions in female beauty change just like in clothes. Maybe my

great-grandfather would have thought Candy was too skinny in the legs or the waist and too full in the hips and the bust, but the flabbergasted young men of Neosho would not have redistributed an ounce.

The news spread through town faster than the time they busted the jug of mail-order perfume down at the post office. Before Candy got to the hotel, the lobby was already crowded. The lucky ones got chairs; the rest had to stand around and act like they were selling steers.

I was luckiest of all. I was only ten and I could go right up to her, and look at her long, blonde hair and her blue eyes and her red, red lips, and I could smell her. . . . She



The men of Neosho had the most beautiful wives in the world. 75

smelled like new-mown hay when you're rolling in it.

People talked. Particularly the women. Some said she was married, and there was no use sniffing around because her husband would be along. Some said she wasn't, but she should be. Some said she was a widow, and some said she wasn't any better than she ought to be and the sheriff oughtn't to allow that sort of thing to go on in Neosho and right in the hotel, too.

Folks called her "Miz" Brown — halfway between "Miss" and "Misses"—like you call women before you know whether they're married or not. I knew, though, that first day. There was no ring on her finger, and besides, she promised to marry me.

That was just after she'd signed the register for poor Marv Kincaid, the day clerk. Marv finally ripped his eyes off her long enough to read what she'd written. "Candy," he'd sighed, like an old cow settling down for the night.

That's when I piped up. "Miss Candy," I said. "Will you marry me?"

She looked down and smiled. The fellows in the lobby sighed, all together. The ob-

ject of it—me—floated a foot off the marble floor.

"What's your name?" she asked, in a voice as sweet as molasses and twice as smooth.

"Jim," I said faintly.

"Sure I'll marry you, Jim," she said. "You hurry and grow up."

But she didn't. She married Marv Kincaid, the ugliest man in town, and settled down to make a home for him. Folks said nothing good would come of it. They said she would leave him or drive him to drink, or they would find him with his hand in the hotel cash drawer or in the basement some morning with his throat grinning.

But I didn't notice much difference, except Marv started staying home nights instead of hanging around the pool hall, and he took a correspondence course from the University, and he wound up manager of the hotel.

Nobody ever had any trouble from Candy, not Marv or anybody. She kept to herself. She didn't gossip, socialize, or flirt—and I guess that made the women madder than anything. Besides, the young fellows soon had other things to think about.

Like Tracy. She came right after Candy got married. She and Candy might have been

twins, except that Tracy had red hair, and they didn't look a bit alike. Like Candy, though, Tracy was a man's dream of heaven, a sweet-formed, sweet-faced angel.

Doc Winslow got her. He wasn't Doc Winslow then, of course. He was plain Fred Winslow, and he was no catch. It was later that he got busy and put an M.D. after his name. Doc always said Tracy was a big help.

I asked him once how come Tracy married him. He thought about it awhile and then said, "I wondered that, too. Not then. I was too excited about how lucky I was and too scared something would happen before the wedding. The way I figured, though, I was the first one who had guts enough to ask her."

"Ever talk about it?"

He shook his head quick. "Even after almost thirty years, I'm scared I might get the wrong answer."

I knew what he meant. Because after Tracy came Choo-Choo, and after Choo-Choo came Kim, and after Kim came Dallas, and after Dallas came April, and I was eighteen, then, and April married me.

April was a blonde, like Candy. She was shaped like

Candy, too. They might have been made in the same mold. It worried me a little at first. I figured maybe that was why I fell in love with her. I was wrong. First time I got her alone I asked her to marry me, and she said, "Yes." April made me a perfect wife, and I never was sorry I got married, not once. Find another man who could say that.

April was everything a wife ought to be. She was even-tempered but not cow-like, affectionate but not possessive, interested in my work but not nosy. What's more, she could cook. In the morning she got up, smiling, to fix me a good breakfast. At noon she had a tasty lunch waiting for me—but easy on the calories. And for dinner there was always something extra-special.

She kept my socks mended, my buttons sewed on, my shirts ironed, my shoes polished, and at bed-time—Well, in Neosho that's the time we pull down the shades. She was everything her face and figure promised—that's enough for any man.

On Saturday she washed the car.

Maybe other places it's different, but in Neosho that's all we ask in a wife.

The women talked. Women always do. They said, "Where are they all coming from, that's what I want to know. . . . Well, she's flashy, but she's not a speck prettier than my Jane, and I'll bet she can't bake like Jane. . . . If they're such prizes, why did they have to come to Neosho to get a man. . . . There's something wrong with all of them, mark my words. You'll see some pretty unhappy men one of these days."

But the unhappy men were the ones who were already married before Candy came in on the bus from Kansas City. The others turned out pretty well, if I do say so myself. Take me. I got me a job at the bank, worked hard, and now I'm first vice-president. Next year, when old Mr. Bailey retires, I'll be president.

Jess Hall, who married Choo-Choo, worked his way through law school, and now he's Neosho's top attorney. Lije Simpson, who married Kim, is a U. S. Senator. And Byron George, who married Dallas, he owns a string of super-markets. I could go on. The girls kept coming after April and they kept getting married. All their husbands did well. The ones who died, their wives married again

and made something of those men, too.

There was something about those husbands that made them succeed. They had the ambition and the energy to work harder than other men. Maybe it was because they knew what they had at home, and they never worried about it. That was the way it was with me.

Who I felt sorry for was the Neosho girls. There was nothing wrong with them. They just couldn't stand up to the competition. None of them got married. Who'd marry a Neosho girl when he could get a girl like Candy—or April?

The only thing was—well, it happened like this.

Saturday night was poker night. We got together down at the hotel, Marv and Doc and me and Jess and Byron George and Lije when he was in town. This Saturday, Congress being in recess, he was.

April made no fuss when I left. She never does. But I felt a kind of premonition at the door, and I turned and said, "You sure you don't mind me leaving you alone?"

She straightened my shirt collar with her gentle hands and kissed me, looking no older than she had twenty years

before and even prettier. "Why should I?" she asked, not nasty like some women might, but simple and direct. "Six nights a week you're home with me. You deserve a night out with the boys." And she pushed me out the door.

It was during the hand I had aces over sevens, naturally, that Doc said, "It's a funny thing—six of us here, happily married, and not a chick nor child among us."

LiJe chuckled. "Maybe that's why we're happily married. Folks I know with kids, they're jumpy and snappy. Things get on their nerves. Little things."

"What I mean," Doc said, "not a solitary one of the girls has any kids."

"That can't be so," said Byron, but we couldn't think of a single one of the girls who had any children.

Doc went on slowly, "There are hardly any little ones around any more. For awhile I thought they were going to young Fisher or Johnson, but there aren't any hardly."

"Why?" Jess asked bluntly.

"In my own case," Doc said, "Tracy is sterile." He looked sober. "I wanted kids, so after awhile I checked up. "When I found out—" He shrugged. "I figured a man can't have everything."

"I thought it was me," said Byron.

"So did I," said Marv. "It seemed impossible that Candy—"

We all nodded. It did seem impossible. We sat there without talking for a minute. I even forgot my full house.

"Well—?" I said.

"Well what?" said Marv.

"What's the explanation?"

"Maybe," Doc said reluctantly, "they're all sterile."

"Why?" Jess asked again.

Doc shrugged.

I started not liking the conversation. "Let's play poker."

Jess took it up. He was always sharp, Jess was. Nobody wanted to stand up against him in court. "Where did they come from? Anybody ever ask?"

"I never had the nerve," said Byron. "It might be unlucky, like counting your chips."

We nodded. It was like that.

Then Marv spoke up. "Candy came from Passaic, New Jersey. It was on her baggage check."

"So did Choo-Choo," said Jess. He hesitated. "I asked her."

We looked at him with the respect of sensible cowards

for a fool with guts enough to play Russian roulette.

"What have they got at Passaic?" Byron said.

"A lot of beautiful mothers," Doc said.

You've been around where someone will toss off an idea, casual like, and someone else will carry it on to something new and valuable? Well, Jess started running with the ball. "You ever heard any of the girls mention family? Father, mother, brothers, sisters?"

We all shook our heads.

Damn it! He was beginning to make me wonder.

Marv couldn't stand it. "Well," he demanded, "what *have* they got at Passaic?"

Jess shrugged. "A factory maybe?"

We laughed. Part of it was relief. It was a joke after all.

"Who ever heard," Byron said, "of a factory making things to give away?"

"Ever hear of installment payments?" Jess asked, his eyes slitted thoughtfully. "Do you keep track of every penny you give Dallas? Or maybe, like me, you hand over five dollars here, ten dollars there. Nothing down and twenty dollars a week for the rest of your life. Or more. They could make anything pay."

I mused softly, "There

never seems half as much stuff around as April asks money to buy."

Byron shrugged impatiently. "We can afford it. Besides, if it weren't for Dallas, I wouldn't have it to give her—I'll swear to that. A good wife is worth whatever you have to pay."

"Maybe so," Doc said, "but can we afford the other thing? The sterility? Sure, as individuals. But how about as a town, as a nation, as a race?" He looked thoughtful. "It don't matter if there are no more Winslows. But Neosho's dying. So is the U. S. The birthrate is dropping. The experts say it's a natural swing from the abnormally high rates of the forties and fifties, but match the percentage of 'Passaic girls' in Neosho against the falling birthrate, and I bet it would fit like Tracy's bathing suit. Yes, sir!"

"That's stupid!" Marv objected. "A business can't wipe out its own market."

"It can," Jess said, "if that's its business."

"The Reds?" Byron tried on himself. "Nahhh! We haven't had any trouble with them in a long time. They've got their own problems."

"One of which," Doc said grimly, "is the same one

we've got—the falling birth-rate.”

“Besides,” I said, trying to cool off everybody’s imaginations, “anything we could figure out here, the F.B.I. would have uncovered years ago.”

“Exactly,” Jess said.

“What do you mean by that?” Marv complained.

“He means,” Doc said slowly, “maybe it’s a scheme by our own government to cut the birthrate.”

Jess shook his head. “Too drastic. Looks to me like this is for keeps. I bet there hasn’t been anyone but a Passaic girl married in Neosho in twenty years. And I don’t think there’s been a child born here in five years—you know, to the McDaniels, and she was almost forty.”

Byron looked hard at Jess. “You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?”

Jess rubbed his sweaty hands on a balled-up handkerchief. “I’m scared.” You could tell from his voice—he really was.

Marv said in a thin, nervous voice, “Well, you’re scaring us, too. Go on. You can’t stop now. I ain’t gonna sleep anyhow.”

Jess swallowed hard and said, “Seems to me somebody is eliminating—people.”

“How’d they do that?” Marv complained querulously.

Doc answered instead of Jess. “Ever hear of the screw-worm?” We all shook our heads. “Of course not. They’re all gone. But they used to be a serious warm-country cattle pest. The adult females—ordinary looking flies—laid eggs on wounds or scratches in the hide of cattle. When the larvae hatched out, they burrowed into the flesh, sometimes eating the poor beasts alive.”

“What’s a dead screw-worm got to do with this?” Marv asked impatiently.

Jess held up his hand for time, like he held it up to a jury just as a witness was about to make the point that would swing the case. Then he nodded at Doc.

Doc went on. “Science wiped out the screw-worm. The female, it seems, mated only once. So entomologists raised flocks of males, sterilized them with gamma rays, and let them loose. The females laid infertile eggs for the rest of their lives, and the screw-worm was extinct.”

“I don’t see—” Marv began.

Jess cut him off. “Instead of sterile males, somebody is making sterile females, and making them so good that no-

body wants to marry anything else. Look at it this way—the paternal instinct is an acquired reflex. It's practically non-existent before marriage. To a bachelor, somebody's kid is just a pest. Then he gets married. If he wants kids, it's just because he thinks it's the thing to do. Not because he needs them."

Doc nodded reluctantly. So did the rest of us.

Jess spread his hands wide. "So? We're being eliminated."

"By who?" I asked.

"About thirty years ago," Jess said, "in the fifties, lots of people swore they saw flying saucers in the air. In the last twenty years there hasn't been much of that. My guess is that somebody—call them Martians, or maybe Venusians would be better, although they're probably from outside this solar system entirely—somebody built that factory in Passaic. And maybe another in Leningrad, one in Nanking, and so forth. And now they're letting us commit suicide."

"Why would anybody—anything," Byron corrected, "want to do that?"

Jess said, "Earth is a pretty choice piece of real estate in the galactic neighborhood

—running water, a good breeze, central heating. . . . So the Venusians built their factories—letting the victims subsidize them to keep the places growing—and waited for time to do their work for them. In a century or less, they can come back and take possession; the former tenants will be gone for good. Simple, effective, and cheap. Nothing messy like armed invasion."

"If we're being conquered," Marv argued, "why doesn't the government do something about it?"

We all looked at Lije. Up to now, he hadn't said hardly anything.

"Suppose we were being conquered in that way," Lije said quietly. "What could the government do? Suppose they told you, Marv, that Candy was an invasion weapon. You'd either laugh at them or get mad and vote somebody in there who wasn't such a damn fool. Suppose they told you to get rid of her. Good-bye, Washington."

"Well, sure—" Marv said vigorously.

"Another thing," Lije said. "Suppose the government stopped that factory in Passaic from turning out girls like Candy and Kim and Choo-Choo and Dallas and

April and Tracy—and that would be pretty close to sacrilege—chances are 99 to 1 that somebody or something would get a warning to Venus: plan number one has failed; start plan number two. And number two might be the messy kind. Any race that knows enough about science to make a woman—and by golly! they are women, all except for the babies—and knows enough about me to make a woman like Kim, I don't want to tangle with."

We just sat there, no more objections in us, trying to get used to the idea. Intellectually, we were convinced. But we couldn't face the consequences.

"Wait a fraction," said Byron. "Lije, you talked real certain for a man who was just supposing."

"I ought to," Lije said. "It's all true. Maybe I shouldn't be letting it out, but the government's been going around with this thing for years now. Maybe you fellows can figure out an answer. We can't. If it gets out for good it would start a panic and the Venusians wouldn't have to wait a century."

Suddenly Marv blurted out, "I won't give up Candy. I don't care what she is, I couldn't ask for anything

more in a woman. And anyone who tries to take her away had better come armed and with friends."

"I guess we know how you feel," Jess said, "because we all feel the same way." We nodded. "Nevertheless, we have to make a real sacrifice. The way I look at it, we're soldiers now, and soldiers have to face hardship."

We all nodded, grimly. I never did get to bet those aces over sevens.

Well, we've done it. The Venusians, when they come back next century, are in for a nasty surprise.

Life is a mite different now. Take yesterday, for instance. I locked up my bank—I'm president now—and walked a few blocks to a little cottage with a white fence around it. The kids came tumbling out the door: Kit, 5; Kevin, 4; Laurie, 3; Linda, 2; and Karl, 1. They swarmed over me like ants over a crumb, holding my legs, tugging at my arms. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!" they shouted, all except Karl, who doesn't talk yet, but he clings as hard as anybody.

I dragged them to the front door, feeling only half my 44 years. There I peeled them away, one by one, and

smacked them, once on the face, once on the bottom.

"Well," Jane says nastily, "did you decide you could spend a few minutes with your family?"

I grunted something and pecked at her sweaty cheek. She'd been bending over the stove, fixing supper.

"You're sure you can spare the time?" she asked sarcastically.

I went and sat down in my favorite chair, not answering. It's better not to answer. Jane is large and round again, eight months along, and they are worse then. But I could tell she was glad to see me.

"Goodness knows," she snarled, "it isn't as if we need you. You can leave any time you feel like it.

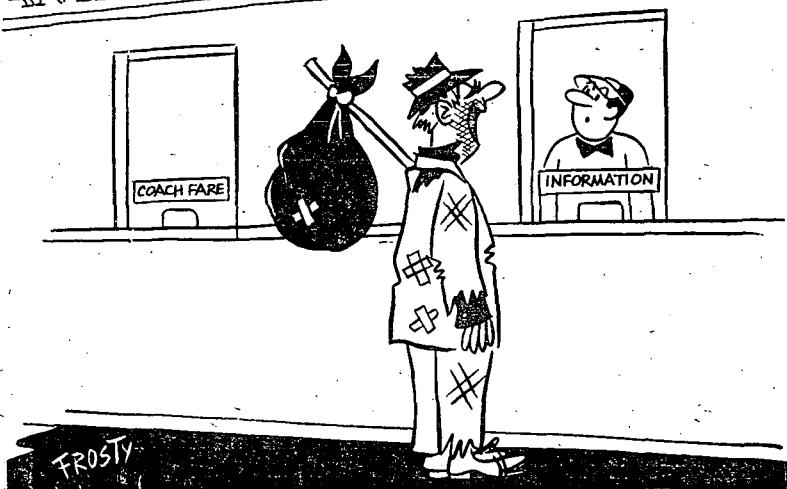
"Just because you pay the bills—"

You see how it is? The Venusians made one big mistake: they forgot the basic mating peculiarity of the human species—the female is naturally monogamous, and the male, polygamous.

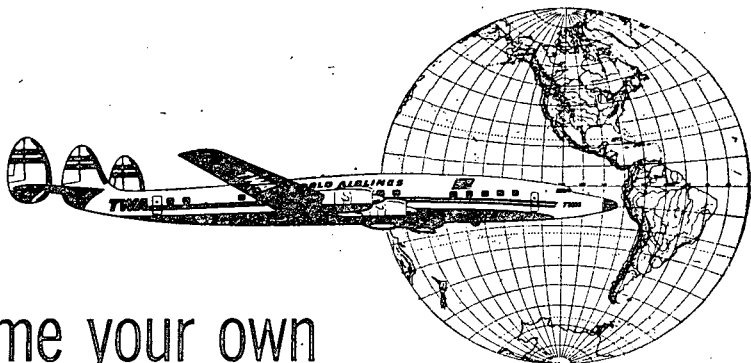
I can stand Jane all right. In a way it's kind of refreshing. It's only one night a week, and if I get fed up I can get up and leave any time I feel like it. I can get up and go home to April.

THE END

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This is the second John Hagan story to appear in our pages; one of the most haunting, most cleverly plotted fantasies we've read in a long, long time. You'll be seeing more of this writer here and in other mags. And you may well remember him for a long time as the chap who wrote—

THE THING BENEATH THE BAY

By JOHN HAGAN

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

The monotonous pounding was directly above his head this time, a heavy pounding that really woke him. There had been other poundings in the last forty years, but never so close as this. Often he had been disturbed by earth movements in the centuries past and dreamed his great dreams as a result, but there was little chance of escape through any earthquake. Those who placed him in this vault knew exactly what chance he had of escape through natural causes and planned to keep him safe till the vault became in truth a grave.

But now it seemed as if there was a chance. Creatures of some species were active above his resting place and a check of his remaining energy showed enough left to try for a loosening of the barrier that held him. If he could once reach a position where he could absorb solar energy again, then the power he craved could be his. Gropingly, carefully, the dark thing in the vault sought out a mind among those above. A mind that would contain his long enough for his glib tongue to win him freedom from doom.

And, as he sought, far away another intelligence stirred to resume its age old duty of guardianship.



He sensed her agony—tried to help her.

JOHN STANTON built his California home on the ocean side of the coastal highway expressly to please his wife, Leda, and her fanciful desire to be alone by the sea. No one else built on their side and even Stanton enjoyed the feeling of being shut off with nothing but the eternal sound of the surf and the high piping of the gulls when mist shut down over the area evenings in a manner that gave the place its name: Playa Niebla—in English, Misty Shore.

When the Stantons felt the urge to be further removed from man and his works, they could walk out on a narrow path to Rocky Point. A thousand feet out from the shoreline where only an automatic beacon flashed warning of the watery death waiting for those small boat skippers failing to keep clear of the reef that projected into the sea. From the south, the breakers crashed against Rocky Point and its reef like rolling thunder, then ebbed with a sibilant hissing that made those of the uninitiated shiver and seek the warmth of human companionship inshore. Since the very beginnings of time, John Stanton believed, that surf must have been smashing at the reef,

and still it stood like a finger of cold Fate to trap the unwary and drag them down to roll their bones along the ocean floor as playthings for the grisly scavengers of the deep. There was a savagery about that surf, as if it thirsted for the lives of the careless. And it had slaked itself too often for comfort. Not only in slamming small boats on the waiting rocky teeth, but in sweeping occasional fishermen off the reef when they forgot to watch the deadly incoming tide. Warning signs told of the danger but dawn still found hopeful sportsmen casting in the surf, heedless of peril.

The lee of the surf, northward, was calm and still by contrast. The presence of a second projection of land formed a channel called the Marina Inlet and drained the swampy salt marsh beyond the highway bridge.

Stanton seldom fished but his wife, Leda, seemed driven by some inner compulsion to walk out on that lonely path nights when the tide was low, and her uneasy husband never permitted her to go alone. He knew that a single misstep on that path and the frail figure of his beloved wife could vanish forever in the tossing waters. Yet she

would insist on going out to the very point and stand there till she was utterly exhausted before he could take her unresisting arm and lead her home to troubled sleep. Yet if he prevailed upon Leda to stay home, she would toss restlessly for hours and look white about the lips next morning.

Once, as a jest, he tried to tease Leda about seeking a lover from the sea and she turned on him with a fury unusual to her nature as she denied it. Instead, on a night when the fog lay thick and the surf was subdued to almost a murmur, Leda touched his arm and spoke, as if explaining:

"Somewhere out there I sense an evil. A terrible evil, a thing that could sweep away all we love. It waits, as it has waited for ages, waits for its moment of release. I know it is there, but I do not know what it can be, nor why it draws me here to sense it. I feel that something is crouched in a cage of horror and yearns for release. I sense it, buried out there." Her breath released suddenly. "Take me home, John, I think I woke it." She yielded quietly to his guiding hand as they paced inshore, then stopped near the house and

spoke again. "No, it but stirred in its sleep. I think it had a dream of me, nothing more."

Stanton, aware that Leda was deeply disturbed, let the weird, inexplicable statement pass without question. Long ago, Leda had suffered through the horrors of war as a child and refused to marry him unless he understood she would be moody at times. And she was, on occasion, almost irrational. But he loved her deeply, and tried to understand. Leda was born in Britain and spent more nights in London bomb shelters than in her own bed while the Blitz was at its height. As an Air Corps officer serving in England, Stanton had come to know Leda and her family, finally marrying the girl when she grew to womanhood. Marrying her not out of sympathy for her frail body, but truly loving the ethereal quality Leda possessed.

Leda would never be too healthy, despite the warmth of the California home and Stanton ruled out the fragile body bearing a child. The end result was complete dependence upon each other till they were half-withdrawn from the world. He had no

resentment of the limitation and hastened home each night of the four years of marriage, knowing Leda would be standing on the steps of their home waiting for him. Even that night of his accident on the Freeway, she was out there, her face agonized at danger to him. Leda knew, even before he told her the details, that he had come close to death when the car of a drunk jumped the guard rail on the Freeway and caromed off his own vehicle. Her arms held him all that night.

Stanton, a nuclear engineer, accepted his wife for what she was and never criticized. If Leda was psychic, she was sensitive and must be shielded from all harm. This was his code and they lived happily in his observance of it.

After the night Leda spoke of the hidden evil, she kept away from the rocky spit for weeks. Some deep inner emotion had been stirred and her affection for her husband increased, if it was possible that complete devotion could increase. Instead of discussing her words, they laughed and played on the beach in the warm daylight, noticing as they did that a barge had taken up a position about a thousand feet beyond the spit

and was driving piles there into the ocean floor.

Stanton inquired about the barge and found out that a long-projected plan for a small-boat harbor was starting. The harbor itself was to be built beyond the ocean front highway and would not affect their home, but an additional seawall would extend their rocky spit out into the ocean to guard the incoming craft against adverse wind and the heavy tides.

Gradually they became used to the heavy thump-thump of the distant pile-driver as it worked night and day to push the project to completion. Yet some rocky strata from the work spot ran under their home and the building often vibrated in sympathy with the pounding till Leda would put a hand to her head in exasperation. But they endured, knowing it would be finished soon.

Then the pounding became irregular and a queer rumor began to run about in the neighborhood. The contractor was having trouble keeping men on the barge to run the pile-driver. A stream of construction veterans from desert and jungle came eagerly to work at the gradually increasing wages and then van-

ished after a day or two with vague excuses. There was no reason they could, or would, tell. The men just wanted to get away from the area, and some were so eager to go that they left the money they had earned. One man even swam ashore late on an afternoon when Stanton and Leda were out on the rocky spit. Stanton helped the exhausted swimmer from the water and brought him to their home for a warming drink. The swimmer was shame-facedly defiant, but determined. In response to his host's curious questions, he finally burst out:

"There's a something out there, bud. I dunno what, but it gets to whispering to you and drives you nuts. All last night it was at me, and I could feel it like little fingers pulling inside my head. We played the radio so loud you coulda heard it from here and that helped a little. It was sort of a begging thing. It wanted help, but I dunno. I got the feeling it was a lousy, slimy thing. Not my kind." He shivered. "So when my boss said I was to work the night shift again tonight, I resigned, sort of. Thanks for the drink, fella. I'm going to shove off."

The man refused to say

more and departed, leaving them to stare at each other till Leda finally murmured:

"I knew it, John, I felt it weeks ago. There is something out there that wants help. What is it, darling?"

Stanton shook his head, uneasily. Leda, sensitive mentality that she was, had felt the nameless thing first, and now tough, hard-bitten construction men were running away from it. He spoke vaguely of self-hypnotism and mass-hallucination, knowing he was fooling neither himself nor Leda. Trying to assume a practical turn of mind, he determined to see if there was any radiation from that distant source, but the instruments he brought home only indicated a slight increase when he went out on the farthest point of the spit. Whatever was causing the disturbance was further out at sea.

Then the desperate contractor changed the aspect of things by laying a road along the spit and backing truck loads of huge rocks out to extend the point. Stanton assented, since that meant the end of pile-driving and he secretly hoped the rocks would bury the hostilely vibrating entity even more

deeply than had originally been the case.

Slowly the seawall extended out to where the tenantless barge was anchored with no more than a quarter of its work complete. The barge was removed and still loads by the hundred chugged past the Stanton home with the drivers in no hurry to reach their destination, yet almost speeding inland once they had discharged their burdens. Winter storms delayed the work but the contractor had a penalty clause in his agreement and began to run night shifts and finally work his equipment all twenty-four hours till the Stanton home was beset continually by the rumbling trucks backing out to extend the seawall.

Unable to rest properly, Stanton complained to the contractor, and that gentleman, willing enough, offered to bear the expense of the family living elsewhere till the work was done. Stanton agreed and then the plan was overthrown by the firm refusal of Leda to leave her home. She might be worried about the menace out at sea, but she was determined to stay till the mystery was resolved.

By mid-spring, the seawall

was virtually complete and both the Stantons walked out to the end of it, curious to see the changes the new barrier had caused. Since it was early in the afternoon, none of the ghostliness of their night trips was evident. The working men had destroyed the illusion of menace by their efforts; the actual appearance of the seawall.

They were alone on the seawall, they found, and the loneliness of the original rocky spit was accentuated by distance. Out here, two thousand feet from the shore, not even a shout could reach them and the bright sunlight seemed to hold no warmth of human companionship. Only the surf rolled against the barrier with a thunderous smashing sound, and then retreated in white confusion as if it was baffled by the added wall.

Almost at once, Stanton noticed a peculiarity out on the jetty. Where formerly gulls had wheeled piping in the endless hunt for food, there was not one visible. Not a bird, not a leaping fish, nothing. Of all visible life, they were the only representatives and Leda grasped her husband's arm with real terror in her eyes:

"Darling, it is still here.

Right below us, I think. I can feel it plainly."

"Let's get off this thing." Stanton knew what she meant. His own mind felt a vague stirring in it. "I think this spot is dangerous somehow." He was further alarmed by the pallor of his wife's face, and the eeriness of the atmosphere. As the construction man had said, it felt like little fingers plucking at his mind. Then suddenly it was gone and he turned to mop his brow and laugh about it to his wife.

One glance and he froze. Leda's pretty face was distorted almost out of human semblance. Her lips were drawn back in a snarl and her eyes were closed tightly. She had the look of one who is fighting a bitter inner struggle. Then it ceased and she spoke, but with little trace of her own soft voice:

"At last I find what I needed. Creature, what are you?"

If Leda had picked up a rock and flung it at his head, Stanton could not have been more shocked. He stammered:

"D-Darling, what is it. Are you ill?" His racing mind wondered if the mental breakdown, predicted long ago by that doctor in England, had occurred. Cautious-

ly, he moved to a position on the edge of the jetty. If Leda had some sort of paroxysm, he intended to keep her from self-destruction.

But she stood stiffly, closed eyes glaring at him, while her somehow chilling voice resumed:

"I understand. You are the mate of this creature whose mind I am using. Thus you are concerned." Leda's voice held a note of cruel laughter that was never her own. "Well, perhaps we can make an arrangement satisfactory to me and I will release her unharmed. Otherwise, and this is all the warning I will give you, I will destroy her mind." Something utterly cold and ruthless in the words made Stanton shake.

"Thanks." He spoke dryly, knowing he was treading on some perilous ground himself. "Suppose you tell me who or what you are, and we can talk about your deal."

"I?" The voice held a trace of majesty. "I am Atan." A distinct pause followed, and then the voice went on, as if baffled. "Surely you know of Atan, creature."

"Never heard of you, Atan." Stanton spoke truthfully.

"What manner of thing are

you that you know not the child of the Shining Ones?" There was wonder in Atan's voice. "I am he who was created by the Ethne as the triumph of their science." A pause, and then again. "Creature, describe your physical being."

Stanton's mind raced madly. If he let this Atan overwhelm him, Leda might be lost forever. A stray thought came that he might defy Atan and be none the worse for it: "So you are the triumph of a science and cannot see me for yourself. Frankly, Atan, I think you are a bluffer of some kind. You may be able to destroy my wife's mind, and for that reason I will talk with you, but suppose you start telling me the truth. Or shall I tell you I deduce you are a prisoner physically confined below me and need my help to obtain freedom?"

Leda's body shook with what Stanton knew was fury and then the voice came far less imperiously:

"I know you are not of the Ethne, for I feel no kinship in you. Yet you have a reasoning mind. By what name do I call you?"

"I am Stanton, Atan. If you wish my proper background to help you, tell me

how long you have been confined."

"Long and long, and long again." The words held a weariness in them. "Let me check my remaining energy." There was a silence and later an almost muffled cry from Leda's lips. "Stanton, I must calculate carefully, for my store of energy is greatly dissipated. Yet do not think I am weak." There was a touch of menace in the words and Stanton smiled, grimly, as he lit his pipe. Atan sniffed with Leda's nostrils and regained a bit of arrogance. "So you offer me worship. In that, at least, you show intelligence."

"Just smoking my pipe. Atan." Stanton spoke calmly. "My race uses the habit in moments of relaxation, not as worship. Now suppose you stop your bluffing. I know about energies. The use of them is my profession. How long have you been in your confinement?"

"In your terms." The voice sounded sick. "More than one hundred thousand years."

Stanton seated himself on a rock, wondering if this grisly creation of some far-forgotten science could tell the truth. Yet he knew that the half-life of radioactive matter could be measured only in thousands of years and Atan

claimed to be the masterpiece of a lost race. He was roused by the voice:

"Will you now describe yourself and your surroundings?"

Stanton gave the configuration of a human body and met a wondering answer:

"The apes of the tree country." Atan was shaken. "In my time, you were as dirt. And you claim now to be the superior race of this planet, I can sense from your expressions. Have you no knowledge of the Ethne?"

"Never heard of them, Atan." Stanton was almost cheerful. From black despair at the probable destruction of Leda's mind, he had come around to grappling with the problem of destroying Atan instead, and drew strength from the idea, he felt.

"No, you would not." Atan spoke slowly. "Their world was not yours. If this creature, no, this mate of yours would only open her mind to me, I could deduce much about you that is not clear. Command her to open her mind or I will destroy her."

"I doubt that, Atan." Stanton was calm. "Without her, you would be helpless again. I know you tried to enter my mind and failed. That was true also of the construction

men last fall. I think you had better quit trying to impress me, and act like the helpless prisoner you are. If you want one thing from me, you had better learn manners. I can pick my wife up in my arms and carry her home. Then the distance will prohibit you using energy to control her. I think you are using a lot just holding her here. How far down are you?"

"Five thousand feet or more from this mate of yours, Stanton. You are a stubborn opponent, and I will remember that in the time to come. Yet I can keep a finger of energy in her mind to wreck it if you do carry her away. Stanton, I yearn for the light of the sun. With it, I can be the real Atan of ancient days, a creature of light. I beg of you, ask your mate to open her eyes and give me one glimpse of the sun."

So Leda was fighting him. That was why her eyes were closed so tightly. Stanton saw her hand make a negative gesture and replied:

"Sorry, Atan, this is the dark time of day. Surely you recall a night and day cycle, do you not?"

"I recall." Atan spoke with infinite grief in his tones. "I am tortured by the memory,

Stanton. Long ago I lost track of night and day. The hammering of your fellow-creatures did not aid me to distinguish, since they continued full cycles. So I must accept what you say as truth. Yet I yearn for the sun. It was truly my mother and the Ethne only fashioned me by tapping its energy. Afterward, I became their ruler, the light of their abode. Till we no longer agreed." Atan hesitated. "Stanton, would you like to rule this race of yours?"

"No." The engineer was blunt. "I have all I need in this world. Besides, I think you are bluffing again. What have you to offer? You, an entity that was imprisoned by his creators for trying to make slaves of them."

"A lie." Atan raged. "I but tried to lead the Ethne to greater heights and they would not see the greatness. I am indestructible and no weapon your kind could conceive could ever destroy me. Do you realize what that implies?"

"A supreme egotist." Stanton played carefully. "Atan, I think I do know your name, faintly. It has been corrupted to Satan in tribal memory and come down to us as a symbol of all the evil that

ever was. How could I possibly be sure of you keeping faith with me if I did aid you?"

The very flesh of Leda seemed to strain, as if the spirit of Atan was attempting to burst through into the sunlight and destroy his tormentor. Then the fit passed and the voice became ingratiating again:

"Stanton, truly you misjudge me. The Ethne, a race so far beyond you in progress that they would regard you as an ape, did prison me here till I repented my ways. To prove that repentance, I have no choice but to convince you. So I will withdraw from your mate's mind on condition that you promise to return here a day-night cycle from now and speak with me again. Will you do this?"

"This indicates my wife must also come." Stanton mused.

"Naturally." Atan betrayed anxiety, and Stanton nodded:

"Very well, but I warn you, Atan, if you attempt to wreck my wife's mind, I will find means to injure you. Let her go."

Leda fell limply and Stanton sprang to catch her, wondering if he had been right. In

a moment a sardonic laugh accompanied the withdrawal of Atan.

Hurriedly, the anxious Stanton carried his unconscious wife to their home, then gave her a stimulant and kept watch till her eyelids fluttered. Leda murmured:

"Darling, stay with me in case he comes back."

"We're at home, dearest, relax a bit and we can talk afterward."

"No." Leda had a look of desperation in her eyes. "Atan is the ultimate evil of our race, and his own, too. The Ethne he spoke of were serpentine-like creatures. I could see that as he sat in my mind. He was draining energy from me, too. To replace part of what he was using. I even caught a glimpse of Atan as he visualizes himself. It was dazzling."

Her eyes closed for minutes while Stanton sat thinking of what she said. If Atan could drain energy from the minds of men, he might work on a progressive basis and win freedom yet. The sun shining in the windows had a coldness about it and soon night would fall. A night that would bring terror and death to many if Atan were able to gain power. He wondered if

any action could possibly be taken to prevent the monster gaining his end, and Leda's eyes opened to answer him:

"Coax him to use energy. He has only a very little left and must conserve it. If he gets loose and makes actual contact with the rays of the sun, he will regain all his power and our world would be his plaything." Her arms came out. "I think you had better hold me tight for a while. No one must go near that place till Atan is exhausted. Only you and I. Atan plans to become ruler-divinity of the world. I knew that when he became angry at you and forgot to hide his thoughts from me. A radiant shape of twisting coils yet somehow so evil our minds can hardly recognize what he is. The only real truth he spoke was when he said we could not destroy him. No means in our world could do that. The Ethne were unable to obliterate him and they must have been fantastically beyond us in science."

Stanton, whose mind had been concerned with nuclear means of destroying the monster, asked:

"Do you believe we should just let him alone? Just let him lie in that vault till his energy runs out? That would

mean closing the jetty and keeping everyone away. To do it, we are compelled to stay near here."

"Just that." Leda's voice was faint. "I must sleep. He drained as much as he dared from me. He is terribly hungry for power and energy. Keep people away." Her eyes closed.

Stanton paced for hours, watching over her. Then he went outside and posted "No Trespassing" signs to bar the jetty to fishermen and the curious. The contractor was finished and no one should come this way now but the fishermen. Leda had come in contact with something so titanically dreadful that Stanton feared it might well upset the delicate balance of her mind, and he was well aware that Atan would seek them out for vengeance if they failed him and he yet gained his freedom. Not a pleasant prospect.

The sound of the sea was like the hissing of serpents as the tide turned, and Stanton's mind began to work on the problem of how the Ethne, whoever they had been, ever imprisoned so mighty a creature as Atan. And where had they gone with all their science? Were they the un-

nameable legends of days long gone? All the races of men told of mighty creatures of the dim past, and all of them held some sort of race-memory of the evil serpent, chained in a "hell" by entities of radiance. In his own Christian belief it was Lucifer, the Light of Heaven, who fell through pride. Was this horror out beyond the breakers the true basis of the legends? Stanton felt a little shiver run down his back as he looked out toward the sea. If the eternal grave of Atan was opened, even in an effort to destroy him, that evil might be let loose on the world again, and who knew what would ensue.

At last, Stanton felt exhaustion creeping over him and went indoors, to look at the frail figure of his wife lying on the bed. Leda had contained an evil spirit for an hour or more, and been exhausted by her experience, yet still could fight against it. As he himself had found the strength to joust with Atan. Where did humans get such resistance? At this moment, he would have run screaming if he faced the incarnate evil. Yet Leda and Stanton held the keys to the situation and no one would believe them if they tried to explain what

had occurred. Just as long as no one else went to the jetty, the world was reasonably safe. He sighed and slept.

Dawn showed the seawall empty of life and Leda with some of her vitality regained. Over an early breakfast, they spoke of what must be done. Quietly, Leda made her point that they must keep their rendezvous with Atan. Only by making him use his energy could he be rendered harmless and only in Leda had he found a vessel to contain him for the expenditure of that energy. Stanton's last desperate proposal that they go away from the area met a firm refusal:

"No, dear, someone else would go out there and Atan would search and wait patiently till he found what he wanted. You and I have all we desire of this world. What if someone who yearned for power came to know Atan and yielded what he wants so badly? Darling, Atan said we had no weapon powerful enough to fight him, yet I think he was wrong." She hesitated, looking into his eyes. "May I tell you a sort of dream I had in the night?"

Stanton nodded, and Leda spoke slowly:

"Yesterday, I sensed that we were not completely alone

on the seawall. It was nothing tangible, yet I felt it. Last night, I dreamed of a great sword of flame, wielded by some hand whose brilliance outshone even Atan's conception of himself. I cannot name it, yet it is there."

"And what weapon comes to your mind?" Stanton spoke with a quiet wonder.

"The knowledge that Atan can offer us nothing better than we already have. In that our power exceeds his. I think it is time to go meet him."

The whole length of the seawall was silent except for the breaking surf. Too silent, in Stanton's opinion. There was something disquieting in Atan's absence. If he was as eager to obtain their cooperation as he had seemed the day before, he should be reaching out to Leda's mind. Only when they reached the end of the jetty and saw the bodies of the two fishermen did Stanton know why Atan was not making himself evident.

There was no mark on the bodies of any violence and the man considered the circumstances. He could forecast the excitement that would follow this discovery. The police visiting the scene, the curious following, and even the dis-

comfort and endless questioning of Leda and himself. Atan would be waiting for all that. Waiting to drain more energy out of the minds as they came, perhaps feeding slowly till he had enough to break his bonds alone. The humans could not even know what shackles held him and, remembering Atan as the Father of Deceit in legends, it was obvious he would work on the superstitious and credulous till he won freedom. Without a further scruple, Stanton rolled the dead bodies into the tossing water, then led his wife from the scene.

They sat on the porch that evening after Stanton had put up a barrier to keep other unfortunates from death out on the haunted seawall. A harried police sergeant, making a routine check after the finding of two fishermen's bodies out in the bay, came to ask if the Stanton's had seen anyone on the jetty. Stanton lied quietly, but expressed regret if the men had been swept off the seawall and offered to bar any more of the rash. His offer was accepted and the barrier came into being.

A chill wind sprang up after darkness fell and Leda shook with premonition:

"Dearest, I feel that Atan

sated himself on those poor men. And then when we went to meet him he was lying drunk with satisfaction down in his grave. Like a vampire thing out of the olden days, waiting to drain vitality instead of blood from his victims. Darling, we must wear him down somehow. I only hope we find the way before—John, he—" Her voice changed and the new tone grated on Stanton's ears:

"Liar. Tree ape. To try and deceive me, Atan, that day was night. Fool, did you think I would not discover your deception? I took the life force of the other animals but before I did, one of them gave me a glimpse of what I wanted. A glimpse of the sun. Now I will be free."

"Liar yourself." Stanton kept his voice steady. The idea of Atan gaining strength was horrible, yet the only way to win over this creature was by craft. "I know you killed those men this morning. You could not even keep faith with me till we talked again. And you lie about seeing the sun. I was awake at dawn and the seawall was empty. You had already drunk up their lives and gone back to your grave. As far as I am concerned, you can go back to that hell of yours and stay there. Your

own hell, Atan, the one that has held you safe for one hundred thousand years. You cannot get out of it without my help. Or you can sit here and amuse me with your idle threats. I closed the way to the seawall so no more of my people can reach it. That cuts you off from life energy. Very sad."

"I can wreck this mind I occupy," Atan threatened.

"Bluster and lies." Stanton was calm. "We spoke of your weakness after you left us yesterday. You could not force my wife to open her eyes. And the same argument still holds. If you wreck her mind, where can you get another? Go back to hell, Atan."

A moment or two passed while Stanton resolutely kept himself from looking at Leda. He sensed the straining in her and then Atan spoke again, in a different tone:

"Stanton, only you know my weakness. I destroyed those stupid creatures by terror, and took their life energy as it left their bodies, but you know this, do you not?"

"I do. That is why I have arranged to have you kept from contact with others. Nor can you persuade my wife to help you if you fail with me. We both know that."

"Stanton, I can offer you every desire of your life if you help me escape. Is it gold you wish, Stanton? I can give you more gold than you dream exists."

"I need no gold." Stanton was curt.

"Women, perhaps. Mates fairer by far than this mate you now possess. As many as you wish of the kind who can gratify every desire you have ever known. All the fairest shall be yours."

"No."

"Power, then. You shall rule all men. All the nations of the world shall bow before the name of Stanton. I, Atan, do promise this shall be."

Stanton said simply:

"No."

Atan fairly convulsed as he shrieked:

"Tree ape, what do you want?"

Stanton merely laughed:

"Perhaps the true story of why you were placed in your grave, Atan. The truth, not a warmed-over lie of your self-glory." He could sense that Atan was laboring to answer and the voice had traces of exhaustion in it, unrecognizable as yet because the passion-ridden creature was too absorbed to notice.

"I am Atan." The voice became vibrant in its self-glory.

"I' was the greatest creation of the Ethne. They were dark, but I was light itself."

"A lie." Stanton answered. "They were not dark."

"Man, do not tempt my wrath too far. I was the brightest of them all. Beside my glory, they were dark. I was made that way by the Ethne themselves, long after their own Creator vanished. I was made of solar energy and light. Those others of the Ethne were more nearly material. For long and long I showed the way to knowledge because I was brightest. Great was my fame and many there were who followed me."

"But not all, I am sure."

"No." The absorbed Atan had contempt in his voice. "There were those who withdrew from me when I was glorious. Left and sought the old knowledge of the Creator: It was not the Ethne who overcame me, it was the knowledge of the Creator. He alone could furnish the sword of flame that drove me from the light and power of the world to the Vault."

Inside Stanton's mind, something seemed to come into place. A strong, comforting thing, that brought memories of his early years and the lessons he had learned. Remembering, he spoke:

"And Michael led them."

A mighty convulsion racked Leda's body:

"Creature, you speak of things you could not know, unless—" The voice died away gasping.

Then Stanton's own voice answered, but not Stanton. In his stead, there came a golden resonance to which he listened in amazement:

"And Atan and all his hosts were driven from the light of Heaven down to Hell where indeed he perishes at the end of time. The others were not of the imperishable stuff of which you were made, were they, Atan? So in time they died and you were left alone in your grave. In silence and darkness, Atan, to the people of this world called Satan. The embodiment of all the evil of all the days. The spirit of the night that creeps into the mind of man to tempt him to his ruin. Tempts him from the path of virtue and then deserts him so you can enjoy even the misery of your own slaves. Atan, your race is nearly ended. No longer shall you creep about in your dreams to corrupt the minds of sick men and delude them into believing themselves divinely appointed to rule others. Down in your

lightless cavern below the heaving seas, Atan, how often have you sought out a weak man and brought war and desolation upon this world? You have dreamed of war and destruction, Atan, dreamed of horror and the ruin of the innocent till you corrupted many of this race. But always the evil wanes and truth lives again. You could always gain your end, Atan, till you came upon the incorruptible such as these two. And then your triumph crashed into dust. Is it not so, Atan?"

A weak gasping answered him:

"Michael, it is you again. Will you never cease to be?"

"Not till your end, Atan, and that is not far off now. Go back to your grave, and know I am on guard here. No matter if you offered these the Rule of Heaven, you could not win release. Go, I say, your power is exhausted."

The voice ceased speaking and Stanton realized the evil aura of Atan was gone. Instead, a nimbus of glory seemed to bathe him as he sat silent, knowing it was not yet over. A moment more and Leda spoke weakly:

"John, are you here?"

"He is, Leda. He lives and will live in peace with you

again in this house. I wish to speak first, then I will go." There was a pause, and Michael spoke again. "Because of the wisdom and restraint you have shown, your days shall be full of peace. This much I tell you. Atan will have less effect than in the days of old. One more thing I tell you and I must return whence I came. To you shall be born a child. A man child. Seek him without fear, and fear not for him, for he shall share your peace. This I, Michael, promise."

The nimbus faded and Stanton gasped out:

"Leda, you heard that?"

"Yes." Leda sought his arms in the darkness. "Darling, we heard the riddle of Lucifer told in plain words. John, he was a robot. Atan, I mean. A rebellious robot. Michael—?"

"The Angel of the Lord. The Faithful One. The Strong Arm of God left to guard the Gate of Heaven. Actually, with all due respect to a very powerful and virtuous gentleman, another robot."

They held each other shakily, knowing they had stood in close proximity to the essence of both evil and good, and seen evil defeated. Defeated by infinite power and

majesty. Then, with the horror of the hours past fading from their minds, a quiet sea sighed again at the turning tide and Stanton spoke, tenderly:

"The weapon of faith and love has more power than all the mechanical devices ever created or to be created. I think I am blessed with the

best of wives, darling, but I am chilled. Suppose we have some coffee, and then—" His voice was touched with a trace of happy anticipation.

"And in time we shall name him Michael." Leda finished.

From some far-off place, they could have sworn a voice spoke softly:

"Of course."

THE END

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HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

By WILSON KANE

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

We're not trying to fool you with the by-line, Wilson Kane. Actually, we couldn't, because Robert Bloch's fans are going to know he wrote this story. Wilson Kane is one of prolific Bob's pen names. We use it here because it could be confusing to have two Robert Blochs on the contents page. So it's just a device to get two top yarns by one great writer into the same issue. Sneaky, huh?

RIGHT after Labor Day the weather turned cold and all the summer cottage people went home. By the time ice began to form on Lost Lake there was nobody around but Solly Vincent.

Vincent was a big fat man who had bought a year-round house early that spring. He wore loud sport-shirts all summer long, and although nobody ever saw him hunting or fishing, he entertained a lot of city people every weekend at his place. The first thing he did when he bought the house was to put up a big sign on his property which read SONOVA BEACH. Folks passing by got quite a bang out of it.

But it wasn't until fall that he took to coming into town and getting acquainted. Then

he started dropping into Doc's Bar one or two nights a week, playing cards with the regulars in the back room.

Even then, Vincent didn't exactly open up. He played good poker and he smoked good cigars, but he never said anything about himself. Once, when Specs Hennessey asked him a direct question, he told the gang that he came from Chicago, and that he was a retired business man. But he never mentioned what business he had retired from.

The only time he opened his mouth was to ask questions, and he didn't really do that until the evening Specs Hennessey brought out the gold coin and laid it on the table.

"Ever see anything like that before?" he asked the

gang. Nobody said anything, but Vincent reached over and picked it up.

"German, isn't it?" he mumbled. "Who's the guy with the beard—the Kaiser?"

Specs Hennessey chuckled. "You're close," he said. "That's old Franz Joseph. He used to be boss of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, forty-fifty years ago. That's what they told me down at the bank."

"Where'd you get it, in a slot-machine?" Vincent wanted to know.

Specs shook his head. "It came in a bag, along with about a thousand others."

That's when Vincent really began to look interested. He picked up the coin again and turned it in his stubby fingers. "You gonna tell what happened?" he asked.

Specs didn't need any more encouragement. "Funniest damn thing," he said. "I was sitting in the office last Wednesday when this dame showed up and asked if I was the real-estate man and did I have any lake property for sale. So I said sure, the Schultz cottage over at Lost Lake. A mighty fine bargain, furnished and everything, for peanuts to settle the estate.

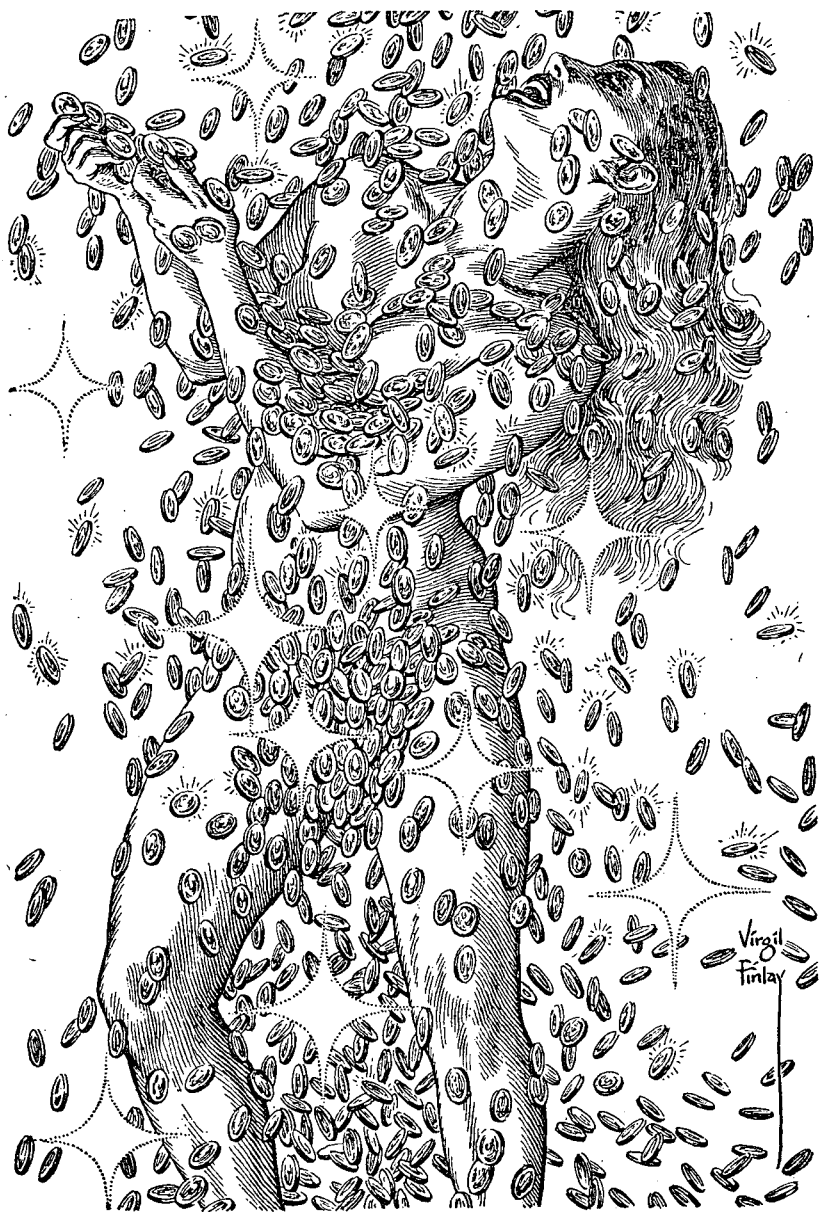
"I was all set to give her a

real pitch but she said never mind that, could I show it to her? And I said, of course, how about tomorrow, and she said why not right now, tonight?

"So I drove her out and we went through the place and she said she'd take it, just like that. I should see the lawyer and get the papers ready and she'd come back Monday night and close the deal. Sure enough, she showed up, lugging this big bag of coins. I had to call Hank Felch over from the bank to find out what they were and if they were any good. Turns out they are, all right. Good as gold." Specs grinned. "That's how come I know about Franz Joseph." He took the coin from Vincent and put it back in his pocket. "Anyway, it looks like you're going to have a new neighbor out there. The Schultz place is only about a half-mile down the line from yours. And if I was you, I'd run over and borrow a cup of sugar."

Vincent blinked. "You figure she's loaded, huh?"

Specs shook his head. "Maybe she is, maybe she isn't. But the main thing is, she's stacked." He grinned again. "Name is Helene Esterhazy. Helene, with an e on the end. I saw it when she signed. Talks like



This woman certainly had strange uses for gold.

one of them Hungarian refugees—figure that's what she is, too. A countess, maybe, some kind of nobility. Probably busted out from behind the Iron Curtain and decided to hole up some place where the Commies couldn't find her. Of course, I'm only guessing, because she didn't have much to say for herself."

Vincent nodded. "How was she dressed?" he asked.

"Like a million bucks." Specs grinned at him. "What is the idea, you figuring on marrying for money or something? I tell you, one look at this dame and you'll forget all about dough. She talks something like this ZaZa Gabor. Looks something like her, too, only she has red hair. Boy, if I wasn't a married man, I'd—"

"When she say she was moving in?" Vincent interrupted.

"She didn't say. But I figure right away, in a day or so."

Vincent yawned and stood up.

"Hey, you're not quitting yet, are you? The game's young—"

"Tired," Vincent said. "Got to hit the sack."

And he went home, and he hit the sack, but not to sleep. He kept thinking about his new neighbor.

Actually, Vincent wasn't too pleased with the idea of having anyone for a neighbor, even if she turned out to be a beautiful red-headed refugee. For Vincent was something of a refugee himself, and he'd come up north to get away from people; everybody except the few special friends he invited up during summer weekends. Those people he could trust, because they were former business associates. But there was always the possibility of running into former business rivals—and he didn't want to see any of them. Not ever. Some of them might nurse grudges, and in Vincent's former business a grudge could lead to trouble.

That's why Vincent didn't sleep very well at night, and why he always kept a little souvenir of his old business right under the pillow. You never could tell.

Of course, this sounded legitimate enough; the dame probably was a Hungarian refugee, the way Specs Hennessey said. Still, the whole thing might be a very clever plant, a way of moving in on Vincent which wouldn't be suspected.

In any case, Vincent decided he'd keep his eye on the old Schultz cottage down the line and see what happened. So the

next morning he went into town again and bought himself a very good pair of binoculars, and the day after that he used them when the moving van drove into the drive of the Schultz place half a mile away.

Most of the leaves had fallen from the trees and Vincent got a pretty clear view from his kitchen window. The moving van was a small one, and there was just the driver and a single helper, carrying in a bunch of boxes and crates. Vincent didn't see any furniture and that puzzled him until he remembered the Schultz cottage had been sold furnished. Still, he wondered about the boxes, which seemed to be quite heavy. Could the whole story be on the up-and-up and the boxes maybe filled with more gold coins? Vincent couldn't make up his mind. He kept waiting for the woman to drive in, but she didn't show, and after a while the men climbed into their van and left.

Vincent watched most of the afternoon and nothing happened. Then he fried himself a steak and ate it, looking out at the sunset over the lake. It was then that he noticed the light shining from the cottage window. She must have

sneaked in while he was busy at the stove.

He got out his binoculars and adjusted them. Vincent was a big man, and he had a powerful grip, but what he saw nearly caused the binoculars to drop from his fingers.

The curtain was up in her bedroom, and the woman was lying on the bed. She was naked, except for a covering of gold coins.

Vincent steadied himself and propped both hands up on the sill as he squinted through the binoculars.

There was no mistake about it—he saw a naked woman, wallowing in a bed strewn with gold. The light reflected from the coins, it danced and dazzled across her bare body, it radiated redly from her long auburn hair. She was pale, wide-eyed, and voluptuously lovely, and her oval face with its high cheekbones and full lips seemed transformed into a mask of wanton ecstasy as she caressed her nakedness with handfuls of shimmering gold.

Then Vincent knew that it wasn't a plant, she wasn't a phoney. She was a genuine refugee, all right, but that wasn't important. What was important was the way the blood pounded in his temples, the way his throat tightened

up until he almost choked as he stared at her, stared at all that long, lean loveliness and the white and the red and the gold.

He made himself put down the binoculars, then. He made himself pull the shade, and he made himself wait until the next morning even though he got no rest that night.

But bright and early he was up, shaving close with his electric razor, dressing in the double-breasted gab that hid his paunch, using the lotion left over from summer when he used to bring the tramps up from the city. And he put on his new tie and his big smile, and he walked very quickly over to the cottage and knocked on the door.

No answer.

He knocked a dozen times, but nothing happened. The shades were all down, and there wasn't a sound.

Of course, he could have forced the lock. If he'd thought she was a plant, he'd have done so in a moment, because he carried the souvenir in his coat-pocket, ready for action. And if he'd had any idea of just getting at the coins he would have forced the lock, too. That would be the ideal time, when she was away.

Only he wasn't worried about plants, and he didn't give a damn about the money. What he wanted was the woman. Helene Esterhazy. Classy name. Real class. A countess, maybe. A writhing redhead on a bed of golden coins—

Vincent went away after a while, but all day long he sat in the window and watched. Watched and waited. She'd probably gone into town to stock up on supplies. Maybe she visited the beauty parlor, too. But she ought to be back. She had to come back. And when she did—

This time he missed her because he finally had to go to the bathroom, along about twilight. But when he returned to his post and saw the light in the front room, he didn't hesitate. He made the half-mile walk in about five minutes, flat, and he was puffing a little. Then he forced himself to wait on the doorstep for a moment before knocking. Finally, his ham-fist rapped, and she opened the door.

She stood there, staring startled into the darkness, and the lamplight from behind shone through the filmy transparency of her long hostess-gown, then flamed through the

long red hair that flowed loosely across her shoulders.

"Yes?" she murmured.

Vincent swallowed painfully. He couldn't help it. She looked like a hundred-a-night girl; hell, make it a thousand-a-night, make it a million. A million in gold coins, and her red hair like a veil. That was all he could think of, and he couldn't remember the words he'd rehearsed, the line he'd so carefully built up in advance.

"My name's Solly Vincent," he heard himself saying. "I'm your neighbor, just down the lake a ways. Heard about you moving in and I thought I ought to, well, introduce myself."

"So."

She stared at him, not smiling, not moving, and he got a sick hunch that she knew just what he'd been thinking.

"Your name's Esterhazy, isn't it? Tell me you're Hungarian, something like that. Well, I figured maybe you're a stranger here, haven't got settled yet, and—"

"I'm quite satisfied here." Still she didn't smile or move. Just stared like a statue; a cold, hard, damn beautiful statue.

"Glad to hear it. But I just meant, maybe you'd like to stop in at my place, sort of get

acquainted. I got some of that Tokay wine and a big record-player; you know, classic stuff. I think I even have that piece, that *Hungarian Rhapsody* thing, and—"

Now what had he said?

Because all at once she was laughing. Laughing with her lips, with her throat, with her whole body, laughing with everything except those ice-green eyes.

Then she stopped and spoke, and her voice was ice-green, too. "No, thank you," she said. "As I say, I am quite satisfied here. All I require is that I am not disturbed."

"Well, maybe some other time—"

"Let me repeat myself. I do not wish to be disturbed. Now or at any time. Good evening, Mr.—" The door closed.

She didn't even remember his name. The stuckup snob didn't even remember his name. Unless she'd pretended to forget on purpose. Just like she slammed the door in his face, to put him down.

Well, nobody put Solly Vincent down. Not in the old days, and not now, either.

He walked back to his place and by the time he got there he was himself again. Not the damnfool square who'd come up to her doorstep like a brush

salesman with his hat in his hand. And not the jerk who had looked at her through the binoculars like some kid with hot pants.

He was Solly Vincent, and she didn't have to remember his name if she didn't want to. He'd show her who he was. And damned soon.

In bed that night he figured everything out. Maybe he'd saved himself a lot of grief by not getting involved. Even if she was a real disheroo, she was nuttier'n a fruitcake. Crazy foreigner, rolling around in a pile of coins. All these Hunky types, these refugees, were nuts. God knows what might have happened if he'd gotten mixed up with her. He didn't need a woman, anyway. A guy could always have himself a woman, particularly if he had money.

Money. That was the important thing. She had money. He'd seen it. Probably those crates were full of dough. No wonder she was hiding out here; if the Commies knew about her haul, they'd be right on the spot. That's the way he figured it, that's the way Specs Hennessey the real-estate man had figured it.

So why not?

The whole plan came to him at once. Call a few contacts in the city—maybe Carney and

Fromkin, they could fence thing, including gold coins. Why the setup was perfect! She was all alone, there was nobody else around for three miles, and when it was over there wouldn't be any questions. It would look like the Commies had showed up and knocked the joint over. Besides, he wanted to see the look on her face when he came busting in—

He could imagine it now.

He imagined it all the next day, when he called Carney and Fromkin and told them to come up about nine. "Got a little deal for you," he said. "Tell you when I see you."

And he was still imagining it when they arrived. So much so that both Fromkin and Carney noticed something was wrong.

"What's it all about?" Carney wanted to know.

He just laughed. "Hope you got good springs in your Caddy," he said. "You may be hauling quite a load back to town."

"Give," Fromkin urged.

"Don't ask any questions. I've got some loot to peddle."

"Where is it?"

"I'm calling for it now."

And that's all he would say. He told them to sit tight, wait there at the house until he

came back. They could help themselves to drinks if they liked. He'd only be a half-hour or so.

Then he went out. He didn't tell them where he was going, and he deliberately circled around the house in case they peeked out. But he doubled back and headed for the cottage down the way. The light was shining in the bedroom window, and it was time for the wandering boy to come home.

Now he could really let himself go, imagining everything. The way she'd look when she answered the door, the way she'd look when he grabbed her gown and ripped it away, the way she'd look when—

But he was forgetting about the money. All right, might as well admit it. The hell with the money. He'd get that, too, yes, but the most important thing was the other. He'd show her who he was. She'd know, before she died. She'd know all right.

Vincent grinned. His grin broadened as he noticed the light in the bedroom flicker and expire. She was going to sleep now. She was going to sleep in her bed of gold. So much the better. Now he wouldn't even bother to knock. He'd merely force the door,

force it very quietly, and surprise her.

As it turned out, he didn't even have to do that. Because the door was unlocked. He tiptoed in very softly, and there was moonlight shining in through the window to help him find his way, and now there was the thickness in the throat again but it didn't come from confusion. He knew just what he was doing, just what he was going to do. His throat was thick because he was excited, because he could imagine her lying in there, naked on the heap of coins.

Because he could see her.

He opened the bedroom door, and the shade was up now so that the moonlight fell upon the whiteness and the redness and the golden glinting, and it was even better than he'd imagined because it was real.

Then the ice-green eyes opened and for a moment they stared in the old way. Suddenly there was a change. The eyes were flame-green now, and she was smiling and holding out her arms. Nuts? Maybe so. Maybe making love to all that money warmed her up. It didn't matter. What mattered was her arms, and her hair like a red veil, and the warm mouth open and panting. What mattered was to

know that the gold was here and she was here and he was going to have them both, first her and then the money. He tore at his clothes, and then he was panting and sinking down to tear at her. She writhed and wriggled and his hands slipped on the coins and then his nails sank into the dirt beneath.

The dirt beneath—

There was dirt in her bed. And he could feel it and he could smell it, for suddenly she was above and behind him, pressing him down so that his face was rubbing in the dirt, and she'd twisted his hands around behind his back. He heaved, but she was very strong, and her cold fingers were busy at his wrists, knotting something tightly. Too late, he tried to sit up, and then she hit him with something. Something cold and hard, something she'd taken from his own pocket; *my own gun*, he thought.

Then he must have passed out for a minute, because when he came to he could feel the blood trickling down the side of his face, and her tongue, licking it.

She had him propped up in the corner now, and she had tied his hands and legs to the bedpost, very tightly. He couldn't move. He knew be-

cause he tried, God how he tried. The earth-smell was everywhere in the room. It came from the bed, and it came from her, too. She was naked, and she was licking his face. And she was laughing.

"You came anyway, eh?" she whispered. "You had to come, is that it? Well, here you are. And here you shall stay. I will keep you for a pet. You are big and fat. You will last a long, long time."

Vincent tried to move his head away. She laughed again.

"It isn't what you planned, is it? I know why you came back. For the gold. The gold and the earth I brought with me to sleep upon, as I did in the old country. All day I sleep upon it, but at night I awake. And when I do, you shall be here. No one will ever find or disturb us. It is good that you are strong. It will take many nights before I finish."

Vincent found his voice. "No," he croaked. "I never believed—you must be kidding, you're a refugee—"

She laughed again. "Yes. I am a refugee. But not a *political* refugee." Then she retracted her tongue and Vincent saw her teeth. Her long white teeth, moving against

(Continued on page 123)



THE SHIP THAT VANISHED

By ERIC FRANK RUSSELL

ILLUSTRATOR KEITH

This is the third in our Eric Frank Russell series on the weird and unexplainable. Here, Russell treats of the sea—a haunting subject on its own merits—and the ships that have gone down to the vast waters, never to return. The "Waratah" was one of these; another case where Man seeks logical explanations for the illogical.

IN 1908 the Clydeside shipbuilders, Barclay, Curle & Co., launched a twin-screw vessel of 16,800 tons. Her owners, the Blue Anchor

Line, christened her the *Waratah*. She had three decks fore and aft, sundry faldelals considered the latest thing in those days and was thought

of as the most modern cargo-passenger vessel yet constructed. One thing she did lack was radio equipment.

Barclay, Curle & Co. had given her the usual end to end examination before handing her over. The Blue Anchor Line's inspectors then checked her, pronounced her satisfactory in every way. Board of Trade inspectors confirmed the opinion of the Blue Anchor Line's men. Lloyd's inspectors joined the queue and classified her "100 A.1." The Emigration Authorities tagged on to the end of the line-up and added to the chorus of approval. It is doubtful whether any other ship up to that date had been passed by so many experts—assuming that every single one of them made close and conscientious inspection and that none had been tempted to play the easier game of follow-my-leader.

Command of the *Waratah* was given to Captain Ilbery, a weather-beaten, experienced salt and commodore of the Blue Anchor Fleet. The *Waratah* set forth on her maiden voyage to Australia and in due time returned. Ilbery then complained to the owners that his new ship didn't seem to have the stability of her sister ship, the

Geelong. She couldn't be maneuvered in dock, he said, unless weighted with ballast. He put it mildly, tentatively, in the manner of one naturally reluctant to criticize a big investment. In view of what happened later it's a pity he did not throw away his in-born respect for property, stand his ground and bellow like an enraged bull.

The owners paid attention to Ilbery's gripe, took due note of it—just enough note to use it as a debating point in a dispute they were having with Barclay, Curle & Co. The shipbuilders responded by showing the proper degree of offended dignity, argued the matter with becoming restraint, satisfied the owners that nothing whatsoever was wrong with the vessel. By implication, this left Captain Ilbery the poor victim of his own delusions.

Nothing daunted, Ilbery set sail again, leaving London on April 27th, 1909. Reaching Australia, the *Waratah* discharged cargo, took a return load and headed homeward. On July 26th she left Durban for Cape Town bearing ninety-two passengers and ten thousand tons of freight.

Soon after dawn next day she edged over the horizon in

the wake of the *Clan MacIntyre*, a small steamer that had left Durban a few hours ahead of the *Waratah*. The big ship rapidly caught up with the small one and as they passed they exchanged signals.

Clan MacIntyre: "What ship?"

Waratah: "*Waratah*, for London."

Clan MacIntyre: "*Clan MacIntyre*, for London. What weather did you have from Australia?"

Waratah: "Strong south-westerly to southerly winds, across."

Clan MacIntyre: "Thanks. Good-bye. Pleasant passage."

Waratah: "Thanks. Same to you. Good-bye."

The *Clan MacIntyre* slugged onward while the *Waratah* forged ahead. The former kept watch as the latter gradually diminished, became a dot in the distance and finally nothing but a thin waft of smoke on the horizon. At that point the *Waratah* could have taken to the air and made for the stars for all that was seen of her again.

Later in the day the *Clan MacIntyre* ran into a south-westerly gale which lasted a few hours, dropped when the wind changed to north-west. The next day the gale return-

ed, increased to hurricane force for several hours. The *Clan MacIntyre* pitched and rolled but got through without damage as did other vessels of which at least ten were in the area.

Mild apprehension built up to great alarm in Cape Town as the *Waratah* became more and more overdue. A systematic search was organized. Captain John Bruce, master of the *Harlow*, reported having seen what he believed to be a ship on fire ten or twelve miles from Cape Hermes. However, the time and position did not accord with the route of the *Waratah* unless for unknown reasons that vessel had turned around and headed back to Durban.

The last ship that might possibly have made contact with the *Waratah* was the Union Castle liner, *Guelph*. At 9:30 in the evening of July 27th, when about ten miles off East London, the *Guelph* sighted lights of a large ship some five miles away and exchanged signals with her in Morse. The *Guelph* flashed her own name but the stranger's answering lamp was too faint to read with ease. All that could be made of the dim beam blinking in the dark were the three letters TAH.

It could have been the *Waratah*. If so, she must have slowed down on her course so considerably as to be overtaken by the *Clan Mac-Intyre*. But that boat steamed to port without seeing a sign of her.

As time went on several ships reported passing wreckage or floating bodies near to or far from the *Waratah*'s route. The captain and two of the crew of the *Insizwa* thought they saw a number of bodies in the sea not far from East London. Some doubt about this arose when the third officer of the *Tottenham* also thought he had seen bodies in the same place. He was supported by the second mate, an engine room artificer, an apprentice and a fireman. The *Tottenham*'s master, Captain Cox, promptly put his ship about and made careful search. All he found was sunfish, flotsam and masses of blubber. His chief engineer confirmed that no bodies could be seen.

The search continued for weeks. Several warships joined in. The Australian Government commissioned the *Severn* to take part in the hunt. The Blue Anchor Line chartered the *Sabine* which sought ceaselessly for nearly three months and covered

14,000 miles. No *Waratah*; not even a boat, a lifebelt, an identifiable hatch-cover.

A Board of Trade Inquiry opened in London on December 16th, 1910, and lasted two months. It became the center of a battle royal between outraged laymen and wary experts. The former poured on the heads of the latter a torrent of accusations ranging from the sincere to the lunatic. They said that the *Waratah* was notoriously unseaworthy from the start, top-heavy, unstable, badly designed. They said she had almost capsized in dock, had run aground on her maiden voyage, that her decks were loose, her boats rotten and that she heeled over alarmingly even on a waveless sea.

The experts fought valiantly to defend their own kind, indignant at the implication that an expert may be no more than somebody whose ignorance is shrouded in a cloak of authority. They cited facts and figures, produced vouchers and certificates, called in other experts to support them. The gist of their defense was that the *Waratah* was technically unsinkable—like the *Titanic*.

The battle was fought with

opinions, there being no *Waratah* and no solitary survivor to produce in court. The experts produced Sir William White, erstwhile Royal Navy chief constructor, who thundered in the manner of one prepared to brook no argument that the stability figures of the *Waratah* proved absolutely that she was stable as a rock. He was followed by an echo in the shape of Robert Steele, naval architect, who juggled with graphs and figures until he had proved—at least to his own satisfaction—that “no violence of wind or ocean could conceivably have capsized the *Waratah*.” She was unsinkable.

But the opposition had witnesses no less formidable. When the experts had killed off the usual clique of cranks and know-alls there remained an unbreakable group of people who had actually sailed on the vessel. These attached less importance to graphs, figures and formulae than to the number of times they had been slung across a cabin.

A steward who had sailed on both the *Geelong* and the *Waratah* made comparisons to the detriment of the latter. He said that the *Waratah* “had a pronounced list and rolled excessively. A great

deal of crockery was broken. The promenade deck moved about on its beams as the ship rolled. The bolts supposed to hold the deck-planks down were broken and one of them fell on the head of the ship’s baker. One could put a finger between the deck-planks and the beams to which they were supposed to be bolted.”

A professional engineer named Mason had said to the *Waratah*’s chief mate, a personal friend of his, “Owen, if I were you I would get out of this ship. She will be making a big hole in the water one of these days.” To which the mate had replied, “I’m afraid she will.”

Another steward, name of Little, deposed that he had left the *Waratah* at Durban to



take a job ashore. The *Waratah*, he said, had rolled badly during her voyage from Australia and her instability had been a common topic of conversation among officers and stewards many of whom held the opinion that the ship was dangerously top-heavy.

A passenger, Professor Bragg, F.R.S., said that the *Waratah* rolled along with a starboard list so bad that on one morning the water could not be run out of the baths. Captain Ilbery had ordered a water-ballast tank to be filled to bring his ship on to even keel but she had at once listed over to port.

Most remarkable evidence of all was that of Mr. Claude Sawyer who introduced a real element of mystery into a tragic affair that otherwise might not be so very baffling. Mr. Sawyer took passage from Sydney for Cape Town on June 28th, after which he never enjoyed a moment's peace.

The ship, he asserted, rolled violently and had a bad list to starboard. Her passengers were thrown around and some injured. One morning he lay in his bath with the water at an angle of forty-five degrees. He discussed the matter with other passengers,

most of whom were uneasy. One of them a Mr. Ebsworth, drew attention to the previously unnoticed fact that the ship's pitching was as abnormal as her rolling. They walked forward to check, watched the bow ploughing into big waves instead of rising to them.

"Not long before the *Waratah* reached Durban," went on Mr. Sawyer, "I had a strange dream. I saw a man dressed in very peculiar attire which I had never seen before, with a long sword in his right hand, which he seemed to be holding between us. In his other hand he had a rag covered with blood. I saw that three times in rapid succession."

This dream was so vivid and made so deep an impression upon him that he described it to several other passengers and insisted that it was a warning. Despite having paid passage to Cape Town he left the ship at Durban and sent his wife a wire reading, "Thought *Waratah* top-heavy. Landed Durban." He then booked another passage at the Durban office of the Union Castle Line where he related his dream to the manager.

Not long after the *Waratah's* departure and before

her loss was known or suspected—on July 28th, to be precise—Sawyer had another bad dream. In this he saw the *Waratah* plunging through heavy seas; a great wave mounted, she nosed straight into it, rolled over to starboard and vanished into the depths.

The Court of Inquiry listened with amazement to this recital of seemingly supernatural intervention. Sawyer's story was confirmed by his wife, the Union Castle manager and a number of other witnesses. His wire from Durban was produced as evidence. It is left to the reader to decide whether Mr. Sawyer had second-sight, precognition, or had done no more than let himself be influenced by nightmares born of long-sustained nervous apprehension. Whatever it was, he had obeyed the call and remained to congratulate himself as one of the luckiest men in the world.

Any layman with the mind of a moose could have forecast the findings of the Court of Inquiry. To satisfy impertinent public opinion the Court criticized the *Waratah's* owners for not taking more notice of Captain Ilbery's complaint and doing something about it. After that, the

rest was characteristic of authority at bay. All the experts were lavishly whitewashed, found completely devoid of blame, and the tragedy was declared to be, in effect, an "act of God."

May God forgive them.

To this writer's mind the loss of the *Waratah* was the inevitable result of a blunder followed by misplaced faith all along the line. The ship was badly designed in the first place. Her builders constructed her to specification without seeing reason to argue the matter. Her owners took her over on the strength of the designer's and builders' reputations. The first bunch of inspectors passed her because they saw nothing wrong with her, not having expected or looked for anything wrong. Succeeding inspectors approved her on the strength of the opinion of the first-comers. The owners accepted the reassurances of the builders. Ilbery let himself be hushed by the owners and, in his turn, disregarded the complaints of crew and passengers. And so on to the bitter end.

There does not seem to be anything genuinely puzzling about the fate of the *Waratah*. All the evidence suggests that at a critical moment she was thrown off her precarious

balance, turned turtle and went down. The *real* mystery is a mental one and concerns the source of inspiration that impelled one man to save himself in the nick of time. This is truly a field for endless speculation.

As in the tale of the *Mary Celeste*, the many accounts of the loss of the *Waratah* insist on treating the event as if it were unique in the annals of the sea. It is nothing of the sort. The number of ships that have vanished suddenly and without trace is sufficiently large to provide material for a very big book. For that reason it is impossible to deal with them here but a few examples may be given.

A loss in many ways far more mysterious than that of the *Waratah* was the swift and startling disappearance of the *Anglo-Australian*—a case that has been given no publicity worth mentioning. Unlike the *Waratah*, the *Anglo-Australian* was above suspicion from the structural viewpoint. She was swept from the ken of men while steaming through mid-Atlantic in weather reported by other ships in her vicinity as clear and calm. She carried radio apparatus, sent signals, conducted conversations over the air. Then, suddenly—si-

lence. Complete silence. Ships and planes made fruitless hunts for her. A long time afterwards two hatch-covers were washed up on the coast of Florida. They were believed to have belonged to the *Anglo-Australian* but identification was not positive.

Even a big battleship can evaporate. Quite recently the Brazilian battleship *Sao Paulo* snapped her cables while under tow to the breaking-up yard. She drifted away with five men aboard. Ships and planes raked thousands of square miles of ocean. They sought in vain.

Reynolds News, July 10th, 1938, came out in broad headlines with: MYSTERY FORCE SENDS SHIPS TO DOOM NEAR LONELY ISLAND. The paper went on: "What mysterious and uncontrollable forces lurk in the southernmost part of the Atlantic—forces strong enough to overcome well-found vessels so that they disappear without trace?"

The cause of this plaintive bleat was the vanishing between Crozet and Kerguelen Islands of the German barque *Admiral Karpfanger* with sixty cadets on board. Another ship, the *Winterhude*, property of Finnish owner Gustav Ericsson, later

disappeared on the same course in the same area. Nearly ten years earlier yet another ship popped out of existence while on the same course in the same area. She was the Danish training-vessel *Kobenhavn* with seventy cadets aboard.

The *Cyclops*, the *Rundehorn*, the *Agnar*, the *Havmann*: the list of missing ships is long and formidable. How many were overwhelmed by natural forces in their angriest mood and what proportion were doomed on the drawing-board is any man's guess.

THE END

HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY

(Continued from page 114)

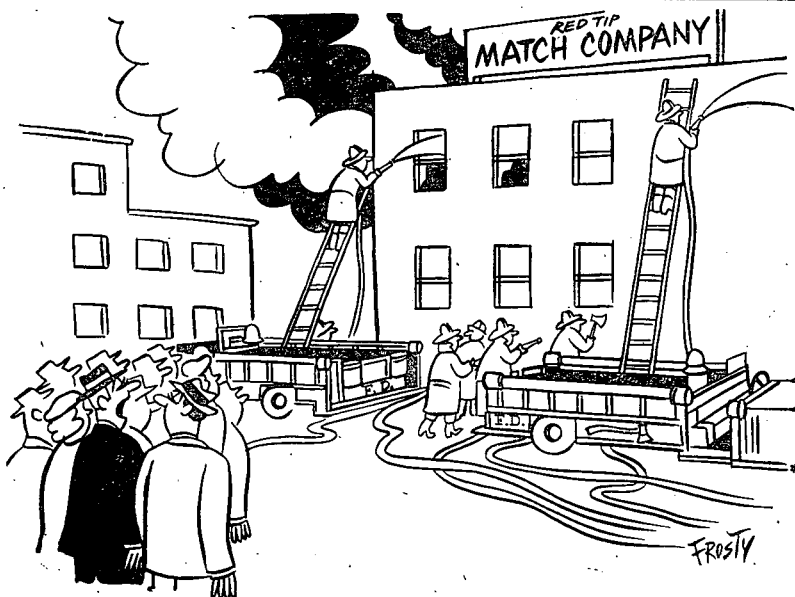
the side of his neck in the moonlight....

Back at the house Carney and Fromkin got ready to climb into the Cadillac.

"He's not showing up, that's for sure," Carney said. "We'll blow before there's any trouble. Whatever he had cooked up, the deal went sour. I knew it the minute I saw his face. He had a funny look, you know, like he'd flipped."

"Yeah," Fromkin agreed. "Something wrong with old Vincent, all right. I wonder what's biting him lately."

THE END



"How do you suppose it started?"

ACCORDING TO YOU ...

Here are this month's "Letter Contest" winners, together with others that will no doubt be rated by many as just as good. Letters have been rolling in since the contest was announced. But we're still waiting for yours . . .

Dear Editor:

Fantastic fiction plays a very important role in our psychological development and I believe a very necessary role. Fantastic things are happening every day—furniture flying unaided through the air in Long Island—and will happen more often in the foreseeable future. Hypnotism is fantastic but very real. Mental telepathy is fantastic, so is re-incarnation, but what a hit *Bridey Murphy* made. "The Girl in the Mirror" uses this idea, I think.

There is a real basis for every story in the March issue, except "The Genie Takes A Wife." The Martian encounters, "Let's Repeal Love" and "The Lavendar Talent" are within the realm of possibility. Within the year we think we will see missiles on the moon.

Anyone who thinks these things couldn't happen should stop and take a good look around. I think fantastic stories should be written with the idea not only of entertainment, but preparing people emotionally for a certainly fantastic future. It seems recently that it is becoming more difficult for fiction to keep ahead of science.

A hundred years ago if a satellite had been launched suddenly there would have been literally a panic. In fiction so many satellites have been launched that far from causing a panic, they have become the brunt of jokes.

Mrs. William Ward
RFD 949
Woodstock, N. Y.

● Mrs. Ward says "I think fantastic stories should be written with the idea not only of entertainment but preparing people emotionally for a certainly fantastic future." I don't agree. I think fiction should be written and published for one reason and one reason alone—to entertain. I think the surest way to lose readers in droves is to try to uplift them, inspire them, prepare them, educate them—everything but entertain them. I know we'll get letters asking—"all right, so why did you publish a directory of undercrowded colleges in the June issue of *Amazing Stories*?" There's an answer to that

one but I won't go into it until someone asks. So, I disagree with what Mrs. Ward says, but we're backing her right to say it with twenty-five bucks.

Dear Editor:

Even if you had no intention of sending me twenty-five dollars you would be receiving this mess of wordage anent the April issue of *Fantastic*.

Beginning with front cover, am delighted to know that some artists still believe in humanoid types of girls. The gal on cover is showing her truly lovely aspect, whereas in the illustration in the story the supposedly same girl is portrayed in her vampire aspect. Wonderful artistic display of dual nature.

The reading matter in this issue seems to me the best in its line, and considerably beyond the current norm in point of occult subtlety. Mystery by inference is often more powerful than mystery by actual imagery . . . how can one give imagery to a mystery anyway?

The characters in the stories who are made to comment on present world conditions do so in a healthy and helpful manner, seems to me, and it is decidedly a relief to finish your stories without having some test-tube brain trying to explain occult happenings by the knowledge of so-called factual science. Every bit of modern science was first an occult mystery. So please stay *Fantastic*.

Miles MacAlpin
7540½ S.W. 51st
Portland, Ore.

• Not twenty-five, Miles. Fifteen.

Dear Editor:

I bought the March issue for the very first time because of the name *Fantastic* and the featured story "The Genie Takes A Wife" which was so colorfully portrayed on the cover.

I enjoyed all the stories very much, but why you put stories like "Feud Woman" and "The Search For Murphy's Bride" in a book and call them *Fantastic* is beyond me. Emily Botford is not a figment of imagination. Her lot and way of life, clear down to the domineering brute of a man, is typical of life, right here in our own Missouri Ozarks. Having been in close contact with these people for years, I know! And I suspect S. Hillary knows it, too. The story is too well-written and too perfectly descriptive, to be imagination.

"Lavendar Talent" could have been the best by far, it could have made the book, but Mr. Vance cut it off too soon. Right when you thought it would get good. I don't like the stories that seem to end right in the middle.

ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

125

On the other hand, Mr. Slesar drew his "Genie" out too long. It was a fantastic story and humorous, but too much inane chatter. To my notion, quite a bit could have been left out and it still would be a good story.

I'm sorry, Mr. Saber, but I think *Fantastic* would have been better without your "Let's Repeal Love." In my opinion it was just plain silly. And that also goes for "Murphy's Bride."

I think "The Girl in the Mirror" was the very best. It had interest, and also wound up in a supernatural vein. This is what I look for when I purchase a book with the title *Fantastic*.

I feel that you should stick more to the mysterious, supernatural, or science fiction type if you hope to improve your circulation.

Mrs. Marie Steele
5635 Prange
St. Louis, Mo.

● *By far the majority of our readers liked "Feud Woman." But we love our minority very dearly also and Mrs. Steele, as their spokesman, has earned five dollars.*

Dear Editor:

I have just finished the March, 1958 issue of *Fantastic*, the first I have read of this publication. Frankly, I was surprised at the high quality of the stories. I particularly like "Feud Woman" and "The Genie Takes A Wife." This seems to be the only sheer fantasy magazine on the market today. Others with titles similar being actually science fiction magazines. Here's hoping you steer us to the heights of fantasy as exemplified by the *Unknown World's* era.

Francis Footen
316 Hammond St.
Westernport, Md.

● *Fantastic was a science fiction book until we "moved in new directions." And it's been real fun. I wonder where we'll land?*

Dear Editor:

I was intrigued by your statement that you like the zany, light type of fantasy. I do, too, and I felt pretty much alone in the world, since so little of it is published. Perhaps this is due, of course, to the possibility that few people find anything funny, in this or any other world, to write about.

Also, I have another gripe—I don't know who the authors think they are kidding, but far too much of the so-called "science" or "fantasy" fiction is nothing more nor less than plain old adventure or "western" type tales, with the locale moved from Earth to Planet

X, the colt .45 changed to a ray gun, and the horses transformed into six or eight legged monstrosities. The only thing "fantastic" about those stories is the fact that they get not only published, but apparently are read.

Esther Barth
2579 N. Stowell Ave., Apt. G
Milwaukee 11, Wisconsin

• *So you and I will be alone in the world together, Esther.*

Dear Editor:

Everyone says so much for Edgar R. Burroughs, why doesn't someone publish some of his stuff? I don't buy all the issues of s-f magazines but somehow everyone I do buy has something about Burroughs in it. I mean enough is enough, do something, don't talk.

I enjoy your magazine very much and I like *Amazing* too. The March issue was wonderful and really made things bright.

Do you ever publish any of Zenna Henderson's works. I'd like to see more of her stuff.

Bari Kleinberg
6414½ W. Olympic
Los Angeles 48, Calif.

• *There's a story—a full-length novel coming up in Amazing Stories, Fantastic's companion-mag titled "Man Of Two Worlds." Watch for it.*

Dear Editor:

In all the time I have been reading science fiction which is about five years now, I have run across some good zines and some bad ones. In January after seeing the issue of *Fantastic*, the one with the story "The Devil Downstairs" in it, I bought a subscription to it and *Amazing*. Since I have started receiving them *Fantastic* has been bad while *Amazing* has been the best ever.

In the first place the covers on *Fantastic* were very poor. The stories in the last two issues haven't been good at all. Who are these authors? I have never heard of some of them. It's about time you got some good artists and authors to contribute to the magazine.

Paul Shingleton, Jr.
320 26th St.
Dunbar, W. Va.

• *So you liked "The Devil Downstairs" cover? Okay, Paul, please hold out until the September issue (on sale in August) hits the stands. We promise you the most bone-chilling cover ever to ap-*

ACCORDING TO YOU...

127

pear on a magazine. It illustrates a story titled "Monster in the Mist."

Dear Editor:

Just finished the April issue of *Fantastic* and really liked "It's Better Not To Know." I was rather disappointed in "The Man On The Island" and "Conversation Piece." They were good stories but did not seem to be either science fiction or fantasy.

I agree with the readers who say that there is too much sex in science fiction. I don't think that sex itself is wrong but I do believe that it is out of place in science fiction. There are various men's magazines on the market that fill the need of sex literature with lurid covers and all.

I wonder if any of your readers can give me any information on a substance called "Lintz Basalt." This is a substance that does not quite obey the laws of gravity. Lintz Basalt has, I believe, an acceleration of gravity somewhat lower than other material. I understand that the National Bureau of Standards is studying this substance but I have not yet received any answer from them.

Earle S. Pittman
1531 Broadway
Boulder, Colorado

• Anybody know anything about Lintz Basalt? We'd like to hear too.

Dear Ed:

Congrats on the first really decent cover picture and art work in the April *Fantastic*. Your book has been steadily improving and for this, I for one am glad. It must have taken lots of hard work.

The cartoons are just right. Let's have more stories by Costello and Rog Phillips.

V. S. Scott
531 Spurgeon
Ft. Worth 15, Tex.

Dear Ed:

In my opinion the April issue of *Fantastic* was worth its weight in gold. I have been an s-f fan for only two years, but I have found out, as have many other fans, that there is not a better magazine on the market than *Fantastic*. Of course *Amazing* always runs a close second for me.

How about some more articles like the one on "The Creeping

Coffins of Barbados"? That was a thriller. I think it would be a good idea to run more articles about the impossible but true happenings of the unknown and ask the readers to give their opinions as to what might be the cause of such mystic happenings.

The stories that had me spellbound were "The Universe Is Mine" and "The Man On The Island."

Ernest Carl Jacobson
109 So. Washington
Fort Scott, Kansas

• *You could get an argument from Amazing fans about this second business.*

Dear Editor:

I have been reading *Fantastic* for about a year and a half now. This is the second letter that I've written to you and I am pleased to say that I am still under the impression that for 25¢, 35¢ or 50¢ there's no better magazine than *Fantastic*. I think it is the best put out, but I have one gripe. It's too good. It is so good that when I buy it, I drop everything and start reading. I don't stop until I finish. This makes me mad, for then I have to wait a whole month until the next issue comes out. I know there's nothing you can do about it except perhaps come out every two weeks.

Arnold Diamond
505 E. 94th St.
Brooklyn 12, N. Y.

• *Publish every two weeks? That's one of the things a science-fiction editor dreams about.*

Dear Ed:

You've got a point . . . science fiction not only takes a certain kind of fan, but the story that brings raves will also bring groans. But why worry about it? Just mix them up and give us a tipoff along with the title, so we can skip over pet peeves. (Mine's the hopeless end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it story of misery and suffering). For the rest, the bad ones just make the good ones shine twice as brightly.

About the only lasting gripe is the writer that wants to get scientific (and over my head) and then stubs his toe on some point on which I'm an expert. If he's frankly on a fantasy jag, the sky's the limit; if he tips you off its logical nonsense; but if he wants to sound scientific, let him know his stuff.

Let's face it. *Fantastic's* readers (who admit it), are individualists. And who ever heard of an individual running true to even his

ACCORDING TO YOU . . .

129

own form for any length of time? You can't fill a magazine with stories everyone's going to like . . . *today*.

C. T. Wood
1109 E. 67th St.
Inglewood, Calif.

● *You're right about that last, Mr. Wood, but we keep trying.*

Dear Editor:

I found and read my first science fiction magazine when I was 11 years old. I have been an avid fan ever since. I am now 21 and in this, my first fan letter, I would like to say that *Fantastic* has always been my favorite. It consistently has an excellent cross-section of every type of s-f and fantasy. It doesn't clutter itself with hard to understand articles. A fact article in *Fantastic* is well-written and interesting.

I read for enjoyment and I appreciate the work, imagination and creative ability an author puts into his story.

Sylvia D. Breitenstein
2005 Genesee St.
Utica, N. Y.

● *You don't want to be educated or inspired or anything like that, now do you, Sylvia? Neither do I.*

Dear Ed:

This issue of *Fantastic* wasn't bad at all. Fact, it was darn good. A lot better than some of the last issues you've forced upon us.

"The Universe Is Mine" was pretty good. The shorts were tops, all except Bill Majeski's "Conversation Piece." For crying out loud, this isn't a confession magazine!

Only five letters in the letter column? You can do better than that. I agree with Danny Pritchett 100 percent. Bring back Bloch. Remember "Strictly From Mars" from *Amazing*, February, 1948? There was a story. Also a couple of fantasies like "The Devil With You." Another guy you could use is Edmund Hamilton. He's been writing weirdies from way back.

Don Kent
3800 Wellington
Chicago, Ill.

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